







HAPPY SUFFERING



# HAPPY SUFFERING

(LA BONNE SOUFFRANCE)

BY  
FRANCOIS COPPÉE  
DE L'ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE

*TRANSLATED BY*  
CATHERINE M. WELBY  
TRANSLATOR OF "THE WAY OF HAPPINESS"

*WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY*  
THE REV. W. H. HUTTON, B.D.  
FELLOW AND TUTOR OF S. JOHN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD  
EXAMINING CHAPLAIN TO THE BISHOP OF ELY

*Infirmitas hæc non est ad mortem sed pro gloria Dei."—S. Joh. xi. 4*

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MON PIEUX ET SAVANT AMI  
MONSIEUR L'ABBÉ BOUQUET  
AUMÔNIER DU LYCÉE SAINT-LOUIS  
PROFESSEUR HONORAIRE DE LA FACULTÉ DE THÉOLOGIE  
IN. CHRISTO PATRI  
FILIUS  
F. C.

## Author's Preface.

DURING the course of last year, after a series of illnesses, which, by two relapses, placed me in danger of death, I returned to the practice of the Catholic religion which I had abandoned since my first youth. I was publishing at that time, in a Parisian paper, a weekly article, in which I spoke, according to my fancy, of all sorts of subjects. During my long illness, and in spite of great suffering, I did not interrupt my contributions to the journal, and most of my articles dated 1897 were written with a feverish hand, with my head on my pillow, in the uncomfortable position of a bedridden person, bound up with bandages like an Egyptian mummy. But the friendliness of the public to those articles was due, less to their merit—admitting that they had the least in the world—than to their sincerity. I had said in them for five years all that I thought, all that I felt, with an absolute frankness that my friends sometimes thought rash.

The influence of the new sentiments which touched

my heart in the most critical moments of my illness could not fail to make themselves felt in those free writings.

Some people, whose advice is very precious to me, advise me now to join together the pages in which I confided to my readers my return towards God. For that reason, this little book, where it is best not to look for a plan or a composition, for it is only a collection of newspaper articles, but which will arouse a little sympathy, I hope, in Christian hearts, will perhaps not be useless to those—they are numerous—who, having lost the belief of their youth, regret it at the close of their life, without having the courage to ask God to restore to them this inward strength.

It is especially for the attention of these troubled spirits, for whom doubt is, as Montaigne says, not a soft pillow, and who stop, so to speak, on the border of the faith, that I place at the beginning of this book the simple recital of the moral revolution which has just been accomplished in me. For a long time I was like them, and I suffered the same uneasiness. I offer them the remedy which has cured me.

I was brought up religiously, and, after my first communion, I performed my religious duties with simple fervour for several years. It was, I say frankly, the crisis of adolescence, and the shame of certain avowals, which made me renounce my pious habits.

Many men who are in this case, if they were sincere, would admit that what first drives them away from religion is the severe rule it impresses on all from the point of view of the senses, and that they did not ask till later, from reason and science, the metaphysical arguments that allow them no longer to trouble themselves. For me, at least, things came to pass in that way. I ceased through shame to practise it, and all the ill came through the first fault against humility, which seems to me decidedly the most necessary of virtues.

This step passed, I did not fail to read many books, to hear many words, and to see many examples destined to convince me that nothing is so legitimate as for a man to give way to his pride and his sensuality; and I soon became nearly indifferent to all religious thoughts. My case, one sees, is a very ordinary one. It was the common desertion of a

soldier lax in discipline. I certainly did not hate the flag under which I had served; but I had fled from it, and I forgot it, that was all.

To-day, now I have reformed my faith, I ask myself if I ever really lost it. In my writings some rare pages may be found—which I renounce and detest—where I spoke of religious things with stupid frivolity, sometimes even with the most culpable audacity; but no blasphemy is to be found. When, by chance, I entered a church, respect came to me on the threshold and accompanied me to the altar. The ceremonials always affected me by their venerable character of antiquity, their harmonious pomp, their solemn and penetrating poetry.

I never dipped my finger in the holy water without trembling with singular emotion, which perhaps was remorse. Yes, the more I think of it, the more I believe that a little of the Christian religion always slumbered at the bottom of my heart. There were, without doubt, some traces of it in the way I always accepted the misfortunes of life.

For a long time, it is true, I have been among those people, usually called happy; but my youth was

very hard. I have known poverty, nearly misery, without speaking of worse troubles. Never did I raise a cry of rebellion.

“*Beati mites*,” said our Saviour on the Mount. I have had this happiness, in fact, in the evening of my life, when suffering reappeared. As I had very badly used, in the hours of prosperity, the favours with which I had been loaded, God has allowed a ray of His pity to fall upon me, and has restored to me the consolations of prayer and faith.

This conversion—to call it as it should be called—was rapid, without doubt, but not quite sudden or accompanied with extraordinary circumstances. Yet I must attribute it to Divine grace; for when I compare my moral state with what it was only a few months ago, I am stupefied by such a change, and it seems miraculous. The benefit which I reap is open to all. To receive it, it only needs to be asked for with a humble and submissive heart.

Although I am only a poet, a writer, and my intellectual life has been almost entirely spent in literary work and the care of my art, I was often tormented, as is every man who thinks, by the terrifying

mystery which surrounds us, and I asked myself, "Why, life? why death?" and, above all things, "Why suffering? why tears?" For these formidable problems the human mind has, one knows, only found uncertain solutions, and, moreover, contradictory ones. None of them satisfied me. Those which step aside from belief, in a God Who sees us and judges us, and in our responsibility in this life, are most particularly repugnant to me. Before the spectacle of so much injustice, the supposition that the good and the evil done by man would only have consequences in this life, seemed to me quite absurd. In other words, I have always felt the need of God.

Belief in God, and in a responsible soul, is only a small thing in the life of the soul. Cold and mediocre though this religious sentiment is, it is sufficient, nevertheless, to keep many men to their evident duty. But to live honourably when one is the son of honest parents, and when one has only good examples in one's youth, is to be expected. My conscience—especially for some years—became more exacting. Every time that I began to think of my latter end, and to try to judge myself, as one day God would

judge me, I was not satisfied with myself. When I went over my past, I had often to blush, and I felt the heavy burden of my faults pressing upon me. From weakness, from cowardice, I did not reform my conduct; but I believe—I repeat it—that there was a Christian in me at the bottom, for I often made in thought an act of contrition; and there was also a Catholic at the bottom, for all death, which was not preceded by confession and pardon, appeared frightful to me.

The God of indulgence and goodness reserved me for better things than a hasty and trembling death-bed repentance.

In the month of January, 1897, during a stay at Pau, whither, already having been ill for several months, I had fled for the winter, I had quickly to send for my surgeon from Paris, and submit to a dreadful operation. I knew quite well the danger which threatened me. I even begged the excellent Dominican sister who watched by my bedside, and of whom I have made mention in this book, to go and fetch me a confessor, in case my state should become worse. But my friend, Doctor Duchastelet, saved my

life the first time, and I thought only of the quick and complete recovery which was promised me.

The warning was clear, but it was not understood, and I tremble now when I recall my guilty indifference and my stupid folly. I have wished to show how forgetfulness of all religious ideas was still deep in my mind at that period by placing in this volume the pages entitled, "Bells and Lilacs." When I wrote them, I had returned to Paris some weeks; but I was still feeling the languor of convalescence. It is seen, in reading them, that on Easter Day last year I could pass by a church without even having the wish to enter it, I who, the following year, hungrily communicated, as is the duty of every Christian.

The amelioration in my physical state was of short duration. At the beginning of the month of June, a fresh intervention of the knife, more rigorous than the last, stopped me again on the threshold of death. This relapse condemned me to keep rigorously immovable, and for many days. They were terrible ones. Then only my thoughts turned to serious subjects. Having judged myself with scrupulous severity, I was disgusted with myself, I was horrified.

And this time the priest came, he to whom this little book is dedicated. I had known him a long time, but only slightly. In meeting him at my friends' houses, I had only been charmed with his exquisite sweetness and his rare distinction of mind. He is now one of the men I love most on earth, my dear adviser, the intimate visitor of my heart, and my Father in Jesus Christ.

I confessed with the most sincere tears of repentance, and I received absolution with an ineffable relief; but when the abbé talked of bringing me the Holy Eucharist, I hesitated, full of trouble, not feeling worthy of the Sacrament. The danger of death was not imminent: the man of God did not insist.

"Only pray," he said to me, "and read the Gospel." During weeks and months, passed in bed and in my room, I therefore lived with the Gospel; and little by little every line of the holy Book became life to me, and proved to me its truth.

Yes, in all the words of the Gospel I saw the truth shine as a star, I felt it beating like a heart. How, then, should I not henceforth believe the miracles and the mysteries, when a transformation

so profound and so mysterious has taken place in me? For my soul was blind to the light of belief, and it sees it now in all its splendour. It was deaf to the word of God, and it hears it now, in its persuasive sweetness; it was paralyzed by indifference, and it now soars to heaven; and the impure demons which troubled and possessed it are for ever driven away!

You shrug your shoulders, proud people, puffed up with vain science. What does it matter to me? I do not ask even you to explain how the words of a humble workman of Galilee, confided by him to several poor men, with orders to teach them to all nations, re-echo still after nineteen centuries everywhere where man is not a barbarian. All I know is, that this same word, listened to and understood by me in moments of agony, had the prodigious virtue of making me love my suffering.

I came out of my trial physically reduced, and destined, probably, to undergo, to the end of my life, the slavery of a very painful infirmity. Nevertheless, because I have read and meditated on the Gospel, my heart is not only resigned, but full of calm and courage.

It is not two years since that, having still some health, but feeling already the first signs of old age, I saw it appear with fear, with its *cortège* of sadness, disgust, and regrets. To-day it overwhelms me prematurely, and I receive it with firmness—what do I say?—nearly with joy; for if I do not call for the pains of death, at least I do not fear them, having learnt, in the Gospel, the art of suffering and dying.

If I have done a little good in my life—for, on the whole, I was not wicked—God has recompensed me with magnificent generosity in sparing me this germ of innocence and simplicity that to-day I feel is flowering once more. It is that which has permitted me to read, and read again, the Gospel as it ought to be read, that is to say, with intelligence of heart, *mente cordis sui*, according to the expression of Saint Luke. Having to recommence all my religious education, truly I have read every day, for nearly a year, many other beautiful and long books, and the saints, and doctors have raised the veil of mystery for me, and have lightened the depths with the torches of, science and reason. Surely those

studies have been very useful to me, very precious; not less the teachings of the good and clever priest, who so happily recalled to me the eternal truths.

Still I must confess I have not a theological head. Modestly ignorant, I have not tried to pierce the obscurities of dogma, and I have only re-read the Gospel, and prayed to God with fervour to give me the submission of the poor in spirit.

I became like those little children that our Saviour wished to be brought to Him, and of whom He said that the Kingdom of Heaven is for those who resemble them. I listened to the Divine Word with as much sympathy as the fishermen of Lake Tiberias, to whom Jesus spoke on the waters, seated at the prow of the ship. An imperious desire drew me to God. I did not resist; I let myself be guided. In a word, I obeyed, and to-day I taste the delights of obedience. It was towards the end of October, at the approach of the touching *fête* of the commemoration of the dead, that my reconciliation with God was sealed. Full of faith and submission, I then received the Holy Sacrament, associating this

great act with the dear departed, who wait for me in life eternal.

"But since your conversion, nothing seems changed about you," some people say to me, with an incredulous smile. This only proves once more how man is impenetrable to man; for I myself know well that I have become quite different. It is clear that the fact of saying my prayers morning and night, going to church on Sundays and *fête* days, and performing my religious duties, has not much altered my outward life. Evidently no one sees on my forehead either the reform I have accomplished in my actions and my thoughts, or the resistance I now offer to the temptations to which I should formerly have given way. It is nevertheless the exact truth.

That they do not find me changed, I am not surprised, after all; for my progress in the Christian life, that is to say, towards moral perfection, is very feeble. Still I have become as severe as possible towards myself. These whom I love, I love more and differently than before, and I make constant efforts to be better and more charitable.

Yes, in spite of many defects in my conduct and—what I accuse myself of with still more pain—in spite of some last access of doubt and of dryness of heart, I am less displeased with myself than before, and very often, when I dream of the sad days which remain of my life, and of death which approaches, I feel a sentiment of peace which surprises me. This peace of mind is only obtained by the admirable discipline of religion, by examining the conscience and by prayer.

Also I have no happier moments than those in which I address myself to God, and offer Him the repentance of my past faults, and all my good wishes for the future, and in which I ask of Him that peace which He has promised us in the other life, and which His grace gives as delicious presentiments in this world. Yes, the only really beautiful hour is that in which one prays, and brings one's self into the presence of God. A hundred times blessed is therefore the suffering which brought me back to Him. For I know now the Unknowable One! The Gospel revealed Him to me, He is the Father! He is my Father! I can speak to

Him with freedom, and He listens to me with tenderness !

The scattered leaves which I join together to-day, and which, once more, do not deserve to be called a book, were written during the crises of soul that I have briefly related. During the course of their publication in the papers, their accent of sincerity, already, I know, touched many a heart, and brought back to the Cross several souls, that had been for a long time alienated. I have been a little proud of it, but not surprised ; for many minds, extremely disgusted by the materialism of the day, and deceived by many other philosophical doctrines which may contain a little wisdom and truth, but of which the best is good only for an *élite*, are drawn at the present time towards the outspread arms on the Cross. The most part, nevertheless, withheld by 'pride,' stop short on the threshold of the Church. May they see in these pages how happy I am for having crossed it, and may some of these waverers be drawn by my example and by my act of faith.



*Small Fcap. 8vo. 1s.*

# THE WAY OF HAPPINESS

Or, The Art of being Happy and making others so

*Translated and Adapted from the French*

By CATHERINE M. WELBY

With a Preface by W. H. HUTTON, B.D.

*Fellow and Tutor of S. John's College, Oxford  
Examining Chaplain to the Lord Bishop of Ely*

“This charming little book. . . . It is well suited for devotional reading, being simple, practical, and suggestive.”—*Oxford Magazine*.

“One may venture the opinion that there is no household that would not be happier, nor man or woman who would not be better, for obeying the simple rules of life here laid down.”—*Western Morning News*.

“Makes pleasant reading, and its teaching is practical and devout.”—*Glasgow Herald*.

“It is full of rich, thoughtful meditation on the subject of happiness, and touches very delicately, some of the deepest ethical springs of life. . . . It is such a book as the devout-minded may profitably take up in spare moments, and always count upon finding something helpful in the quest for happiness.”—*Aberdeen Journal*.

“A bright and cheery companion.”—*Church Bells*.

“We would be glad to find every one reading its simple, true, and beautiful thoughts.”—*New Zealand Guardian*.

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## Introduction

ENGLISH people do not profess to know very much about the religion of France. Most of us are content to remain in a condition of intolerant ignorance. The typical English tourist still walks round a French cathedral with his guide-book ; behaves at Mass with as little reverence as if he were an Italian ; perhaps peeps into a confessional ; and goes back to his inn to read in a virulent newspaper the anti-Christian expostives of a "liberal" ministry. At home, when the reader of the daily press is shocked by the tragic blunders of the Dreyfus case, he is led to put them all down to the influence of the Jesuits. Further investigation, perhaps, leads only to an impression, derived

from M. Zola, that morally France is, in every class, a mass of corruption ; or, on the authority of M. Anatole France, that the religion of the country is a hotbed of ecclesiastical intrigue.

From this curious condition, in which his idea of the power of the Christian life among a great people is compounded of ignorance and prejudice, the British reader is awakened from time to time by some book which penetrates to the households of the middle class, and astonishes by its freshness, its reality, and its faith. Such a book was the exquisite *Curé de Campagne* of M. Yves de Querdec. After it came its companion, the *Curé de Canton*. In these charming and simple letters we saw the ideal of self-renunciation and of devotion set forth with a grace such as only the French language can express, with a sane humanity, and with a convincing appeal. I speak only of such recent books—and among them I would rank that beautiful little tract, *L'Art d'être heureux*, already translated into English as “The Way of

Happiness." But those who have made any incursions at all into the literature of Catholicism find it impossible to forget what they owe to the saints of past days, and in France perhaps chiefest of all to Fénelon. Religion, indeed, has again and again spoken to us through the masters of French literature. And so it still speaks.

It were strange if even the most insular and Protestant among us did not feel that Christianity is indeed alive in France. If we look a little farther into the matter, we are struck by a remarkable phenomenon in the religious as in the literary world. After decades of satire and scorn, of criticism mingled with contempt, it is undeniable that there is a tendency among men of letters to revert to the Christian ideal of life. It is not a submission to hierarchical assumption, but a response to the perpetual claim of the Incarnate God. They go not to Canossa, but to Calvary.

It is part, this reaction, of the great movement

of our time, in spite of the extraordinary complications of our luxury and our science, towards simplicity of thought and life. The movement may seem almost secret at present, but it is certain. In active life it is seen in the ardour for travel among savage peoples, and, how nobly we all know, in the enthusiasm of nations to serve a national cause on the field of battle. In literature it has found expression in symbolism : and very often symbolism and simplicity walk hand in hand. It is that union, indeed, which gives its value to the work of the French writers who, weary, satiated, dissatisfied, converted—whatever they be—have turned from the exaggerations and affectations, fashions of eccentricity, passions more than half unreal, to the pure simplicity of the Life and Gospel of Christ. It is impossible to doubt the reality of some of those simple verses, written by men whose experiences have been so bitter and so evil, but who have felt, at last, the fascination of the Cross. They fall, they pray, like all those hungry and

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thirsty souls on the dusty road of life who are touched by a ray of hope, as one of them has said, before the roadside Calvary.<sup>1</sup> The Calvary is the perpetual contrast to all those acts of wickedness, those grimaces of sin, which once attracted the artificial, satiated men of pleasure. What is the end of it all, they say? What, but to die in simplicity of heart, men of sin though we have been. The saints of old are those who truly live: and we are those who are dead, till we learn with them to live by the ideas that are eternal.<sup>2</sup>

So comes the longing for the monastic life, with its single interest but its wide knowledge. "You can never astonish a monk," says one of them; for to live always in the presence of the greatest, the primal, thoughts of God, gives a power beyond all knowledge of the world. It is the force that belongs to the simplicity that is towards Christ.

<sup>1</sup> Verlaine's verses prefixed to *Liturgies Intimes*.

<sup>2</sup> *Tous aint*, in the same volume.

The strength is as the strength of ten,  
Because the heart is pure.

So that, so late in the world's history, men turn back again to the simple ideas which made their forefathers seek refuge in the cloister; and the symbolism of a great cathedral speaks to them as it spoke to its makers in the Middle Age. "Convinced that the only true need of man was to place himself in direct communication with God, to forestall death by merging himself already in the Divine, it led souls through the cloister by purging their earthly interest, their fleshly aims, and brought them back again and again to the same purpose of renunciation and sympathy, the same ideas of justice and love; and then, to retain them, to preserve them from themselves, it drew God everywhere, in every form and symbol of art, to declare His perpetual Presence that enclosed man as by a wall."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *La Cathédrale*, Huysmans.

So men speak to-day in the language of an age that seems long past. Among writers such as these we feel, certainly, at least the traces of a literary preciosity. Sometimes they seem to us hardly more real in their pious emotions than in their fantastic sins. They seem to us often to be proud of the strange dress they find themselves in, as Verlaine of his "chemise de conférence," and to make play with thoughts that lie with us too deep for tears. And yet we may not forget that they have in much the same way criticised some of our own greatest writers. \* When the poet of *Fêtes Galantes* and of *Liturgies Intimes* tried to translate *In Memoriam*, he turned aside from the attempt, because "Tennyson was too noble, too *Anglais*, and when he should have been broken-hearted he had many reminiscences."

Be that as it may, and judge some of these poets as we will, we must perceive that with all their returns to Medievalism they are never out of touch with the most modern thoughts of

modern life. The Christian tone of the great writers, who have in France to-day made peace with the Church, is essentially a modern tone ; and, as has been said by a writer who has evidently no sympathy with Catholicism, "the modern literature of France is persistently 'neo-Christian.'" It has been observed that now, after fifty years, the *Revue des Deux Mondes* prints no article that is not favourable to Catholicism. And it is by no means only among poets that the movement is most clear. Within the last few weeks the formal conversion to Catholicism of M. Brunetière, perhaps the most learned of living Frenchmen, has been announced. All this, too, it should be observed, is not merely a Catholic reaction. It is the expression of a tendency towards moral effort, courage, renunciation, patriotism.

Already we have seen how naturally it turns Godward. Again, a French writer, the exquisite taste and purity of whose style has long been the admiration of Europe, may tell us of

the satisfaction that is found in the simplicity of the Gospel. He was lying for days motionless at the end of a long and dangerous illness, and the sustenance of his weary frame was this : "For weeks and months, passed in my bed and in my room, I lived with the Gospel, and little by little each line of the Holy Book became alive for me, and assured me that it spoke the truth. Yes ; in all the words of the Gospel I have *seen* the truth shine like a star, I have *felt* it like the beating of a heart. How could I any longer hesitate to believe in miracle and mystery when there had happened within me a transformation so profound and so mysterious ? For my soul had been blind in the light of the faith, and now saw it in all its splendour ; had been deaf to the word of God, and heard it to-day in the sweetness of its persuasion ; had been palsied with indifference, and now raised itself to heaven with free wings, and the foul demons that had possessed it were cast out for ever. . . . So the words of a humble Workman

of Galilée, entrusted by Him to some poor men with the command to teach the nations, resound still, after nineteen centuries, wherever man is no more a barbarian." They are the words of genuine experience from a master in literature.

This is the book which has already found many readers in England, and of which a translation, necessarily imperfect—for it is impossible adequately to render, in our tongue, the *nuances* and the grace of the original—is now offered, with the sanction of the distinguished author. How it came into existence M. Coppée himself explains in his touching preface. The many subjects of which it treats, now lightly, now with a grave dignity, have interests for us of varying force. The separate essays are like gems of differing colour and value, placed in a necklace or ring of gold. The gold which sets and connects them has been tried in the furnace of affliction. Their beauty is all from the same source: they are jewels, as the

old Greek hymn says, "of right, celestial worth."

The answer which M. Coppée gives to the problem of life is that which the Holy Church throughout all the world sets foremost in her prayer and praise. On the bed of sickness, in the fresh days of spring, amid simple amusements, in the tragedy of poverty, in the heroism of missionary effort, in company with the wonders of nature or the greater wonders of love and home, in patriotism, in intellectual labour, in humble trust and penitent confession the answer is still the same. It is that which ends the beautiful Basque story that Pierre Loti has called *Ramuntcho*. The brave, faithful lad turns away at the last moment from the hope of winning Gracieuse from the convent. The sacred words, the sacred life, appeal beyond explanation and beyond resistance—

O crux, ave, spes unica.

The gates are closed and the nuns sing within

at peace. Without, the world is at war, temptations surge, the claims of life are urgent, hard, terrible, insistent.

O crux, ave, spes unica.

W. H. H.

BURFORD

*Eve of S. James, 1900.*

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I

Bells and Lilacs



## Bells and Lilacs

EASTER Bells! Easter Bells! How melancholy you sound in the April sky! Pale lilacs of the suburbs, why shed such regret and homesickness on the solitary passer-by? He counts the years, the unnumbered years, when he has heard you, Easter Bells, on a day like this, fresh and clear, with the same dazzling sky, in which not one single swallow yet flies. He counts the years, the unnumbered years, when he has breathed your sweet scent, slender lilacs of Paris, as he passed the railings of the gardens, where your flowery clusters overtop the walls.

And this heavy thought falls on his spirit, "Again a spring to live."

He remembers his youth, when you shed joy upon him, bells and lilacs, and when to hear you, and to smell the scent of your flowers, suddenly inundated him with a vague but delicious hope.

His youth! how far off it is, and how short it was! It lasted for him so long only as he awoke each morning saying to himself, "What happiness will come to me to-day?"

For youth is just that waiting for, expecting, happiness—and absolute, complete, absurd happiness!

"To-morrow I shall meet the woman whose smile will open for me an eternal paradise. To-morrow the war will break out, when I shall become the gallant and victorious hero to whom the suppliants will bring the keys of the town."

"To-morrow I shall imagine the plan and write the first verses of the drama, or the poem, which will render me immortal."

Love, glory, genius, he who has not dreamed of you—what shall I say?—ardently and foolishly hoped for you, can he pretend that he has ever been young? The passer-by, already old, who is lulled by the voice of the bells and caressed by the scent of the lilacs, recalls his brief youth. It ended long ago, on the day he discovered the mediocrity of life, when he perceived that only the desire is good, that all enjoyment is followed

by bitterness and disgust, that the end aimed at recedes unceasingly before the effort to recall it. It ended when he awoke, one sad morning, without expecting anything sublime or extraordinary to happen, when, reading over the page he had written the night before, he found it cold and by much inferior to his dream, when he saw twisting itself over with its mocking smiles, the little lizard spoken of by Heinrich Heine, the little lizard of irony and betrayal.

Nevertheless life seemed to him still sweet, but like a fruit warmed by the September sun. That freshness of spirit was lost, and lost for ever, which feels like cherries gathered from the boughs and eaten under the tree, in the morning when they are still covered with the breath of night. Now and then he revolted—he was indignant that the strength of hope and illusion so soon becomes feeble—and as if to console him for a minute, at every fresh spring-time, a little bit of youth came back to him by unexpected fits and starts, by sudden gusts.

It was on mornings like this one, about Eastertide, that in the gardens the lilacs suavely opened with

the tulips and wallflowers, and that, like captive monsters in the open arches, the heavy bells balanced themselves and threw their solemn appeals into the expanse of heaven.

He then took courage, he began to think again a little of glory and happiness. "Love," advised the tender flowers. "Work," said the heroic, brazen bells. He invoked them, among the host of his past, those bright and fresh holiday mornings. He was not chilly in those days; it did not trouble him that the north-east wind struck his face and blew his garments about.

It was principally on the large boulevard in front of the church that this joyous wind did a hundred tricks, seeming first to exercise itself in preference upon people who were going to or returning from Mass. When the band of little orphans arrived, conducted by the religious, it made the black cloaks and the blue ribbon on their caps fly about, and amused itself in transforming the head-dresses of the sisters into large white butterflies.

It rudely shook the flowers and feathers on the heads of the elegant Parisiennes. Then it twisted the

pleats of his cassock around the thin legs of an old priest, and obliged him to hold his hat on with his hand ; and it continued its impropriety by plaguing the skirts of a *dévote* in mourning, who, embarrassed by her umbrella, her bag stuffed out with images, turned round madly scandalized, not being able to hide her ankles.

But all at once this roguish wind perceived that, on the opposite house, a Venetian shutter was badly fastened ; quick he runs there, and makes it bang against the wall.

After that it was the helmets of two dragoons who were walking that attracted him, and he began to scatter the black horsehair of their plumes and blow it into their eyes.

At last remarking in the crowd a citizen with a large stomach, wearing the first straw hat of the season, he soon unceas'd the head of this fat papa, and obliged him to run, blowing like a grampus, and blind with dust, after his head-covering, which rolled before him like a hoop.

And on those bygone Easter mornings it was not only the wind which was in such good humour.

Everything breathed cheerfulness. The sky was clear, and the women looked happy. The same blue was in the sky and in the eyes of the fair.

And the green! Oh, the fresh, the tender, the light, the delicious green! On the skeletons of the backward trees it hardly began to show at all, undecided, fleeting, like a vague smoke. On others the buds were almost bursting into little light leaves—so young—with something of surprise and delight, like the faces of children.

But above all there were lilacs. The lilac, the shrub which at this season has, so to say, no leaves, but which breaks out in bunches in a mass of flowers. Lilacs there were; some everywhere: in vases on the window-sills, on the fruiterer's stall, in the salesman's little cart, all along the pavement.

The women who passed held them in large bunches with both hands, and some of the horses in the cabs had little branches of them stuck close to their blinkers.

When one went into the outskirts of the city, the masses of flowers overflowed and drooped over all the fences.

Oh, this lilac, which flowers first, and lasts hardly a fortnight, it is truly the flower and emblem of the Parisian, the inhabitant of the grand city, so impatient and so eager, pressed by haste to possess and to enjoy.

'The solitary passer-by recalled the spring-times of his past. How all that used to intoxicate him, the teasing wind, the bright sky, the early flowers, that fresh green, and above, the harmonious tumult of the Easter bells over the happy and sunny crowd !

Nevertheless, still, how all that gave him a renewal of youth ! Alas ! is it certainly ended ? To-day, ill and feeble, shivering at the least sharp breath of north-east wind, the lilacs no longer excited him ; the aerial concert annoyed him.

Is it really he--the lover and the poet--at the bottom ? He is the same--he from whom formerly every flower had a kiss, he in whom every rhyme awoke a thousand songs : is it really he who can remain, quite indifferent to a perfume, to a harmony ? Oh, the cruel thought ! Is it really the end, and will he no more know the enchantment of nature and life ? . . .

At this moment, a few steps from him in the long

avenue where he is still sauntering, he sees a young man and a young woman sitting on a bench in the shade, where the sun sifts through the thin leafage. It is a workman's family, of the poorest; for even though it is a *fête* day, he is without a head-covering, and in the common dress—and such a dress!—and has kept on his knitted vest and working jacket. In the little basket-carriage, quite close to him, where the woman has put a bunch of lilac, a tiny child was sleeping, and the little one, who has just awoke, opens its eyes on this wonder, and stretches its mottled hands involuntarily towards the flowers. The man holds on one knee his firstborn—two years old at most—and the child, who hears the bells of the neighbouring church, is charmed by the beautiful music, and bends his head, beating time to each vibration of the bells. Then the couple look in turn at the two children as fathers and mothers look, then turn their heads towards each other and smile slowly. Oh, the faint smile of the miserable poor!—but a smile in which there is at the time, for these humble people, a little joy and love. Oh, how ashamed he is now, this pensive

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passer-by, of his selfish and wicked gloom! What does it matter that he is growing old, and that the renewal of spring brings him less and less strength? Bloom, oh April lilacs! Ring all your chimes, oh hallelujah bells! Flourish spring, riches of the poor! And be blest by all the unhappy, and all the men in the decline of life, whose hearts you have warmed and softened as they watched the happiness of others.

*April 22, 1897.*



II

**Guignol**



## Guignol

I was at Pau, last February, that the illness against which I am still fighting first struck me. Ah ! I shall long remember it !—my room at the Hôtel de France, where at first I had so joyfully established myself, on opening my window, looking on the dazzling panorama of the Pyrenees, and where, a few days after, I shook under the bedclothes, my teeth chattering, bathed in a cold perspiration, and feeling my fingers tremble between the sympathetic hands of the sick-nurse, anxiously standing at my bedside.

Yes, I recall with fright those bouquets of flowers on the wall-paper, which I saw in my half-delirium, transforming themselves into heads of old Roman soldiers. Why Roman soldiers ?—so sad and horribly ugly under their helmets, half opening their heavy eyelids and looking at me with their white, blind

eyes. But the sunrise, above all, after nights of sleeplessness, was frightful.

“Sister, what time is it?”

“Seven o’clock has just struck, sir.”

The wings of the cap shook a little in the corner of the large armchair where the sister had dozed a little.

“It ought to be daylight,” she said.

She got up, and in her kind glance, fixed for an instant on me, I read a pity which troubled me. She then went to the window, like the phantom of a large white body in the light of the night-light, and hastily drew aside the curtain. Amid the dark clouds of a rainy morning appeared now and then some patches of snow on the mountains, and the sky resembled dirty lumps of cotton wool. No, I shall never forget the misery and distress of awaking in sickness in that chance lodging, so far from my loved ones.

But it is of the least sad of my recollections that I would tell to-day. Two weeks have passed since the first attack. The surgeon’s knife has saved me, till a fresh misfortune. I am still in bed and very feeble,

but calmer, and without the least fever. The hideous masks of the Roman soldiers have again become bunches of flowers. It is in the afternoon. It is fine, and the soft climate of Béarn allows one to have the window open. When I raise my eyes for a minute from the book I am reading, with my head resting on my elbow, it is to admire a peep of the chain of the Pyrenees and the Pic d'Ossan, whose white summits, lightly tinted with lilac, cut into the fresh blue of the sky. What calm ! I hear ascending, confused in a vague murmur, the conversation of the passers-by, the happy voices of children who are playing on the broad terrace in front of the hotel.

The Dominican Sister is still sitting by my bedside, but I no longer make her uneasy or distract her every minute from her prayers. . . .

Suddenly the sound of a cracked bell, which is being rung, mingles with the noise outside.

"Ah, Sister Séraphique, it is four o'clock. . . . Guignol is going to give his representation."

We are now a pair of friends, Sister Séraphique and I. She is an excellent woman, evidently of humble origin, age uncertain, perhaps forty—not pretty, her

face surrounded with her white cap—but wearing her nun's dress with dignity, and with such sweetness! In her all is soft: look, gesture, and voice, in spite of the *accent*. At the beginning of my illness she was only silent; then I inspired her with confidence, and now she tells me, without doubting that it is praiseworthy, her routine of devotion, always the same, of monotonous charity.

How far distant you are, you cruel and sharp words of Parisian conversation about acquaintances, tearing to pieces the absent great people of the world! Dare I tell it? I do not regret you the least, tasteful and poisoned entertainment, and content myself very well during the ennui of convalescence with the little stories of this good sister, where there is no question of anything but of devout exercises and of the care of the sick, and which exhale a perfume of combined incense and carbolic acid.

Those little ill-natured words of society make one sneer nervously, but what charm, what soothing, there is in remarks which come from a simple and pure heart! Now, one of my amusements—and, for the moment, I have not many—is when Guignol's hoarse

voice begins to be heard, to see the sister put her rosary in her pocket, hastily kiss some holy medal, go to the window, and there, half hidden by the curtain, delightedly enjoy the exhibition.

Truly it is all the poor sister knows or will ever know of the theatre, but the heart of the good woman is as artless as those of the infantine auditory assembled before the box of marionettes, and blushing with pleasure she covers her face now and then with her hands to hide her mirth, which she thinks the least bit immodest, for she laughs, this holy and quiet person, she laughs freely at all the incongruities and cruelties of the poor little man.

From my bed I hear only vaguely the grinding organ of Guignol, his screams of joy after every crime, and the hard sound of his stick hitting the wooden heads ; but I know by heart the trivial and ferocious parody which irresistibly excites the laughter, not only of the little ones installed on the benches, but also that of the sightseers grouped round the ring.

For this old farce never varies. Guignol's wife reproaches him for being idle and drunken, and

Guignol crumples her cap with the tip of his stick. The porter enters with a notice to quit in his hand, and *Guignol*, who is just throwing his household goods out of the window, puts one of them on the porter's head as a cap. The proprietor intervenes, and Guignol belabours the proprietor. The police arrive, and Guignol assails the police. Justice, human justice, is powerless before this irrepressible evil-doer. When the magistrate arrives, dressed in his black gown and cap, Guignol knocks him down without pity with a back stroke of his stick. The hangman and the devil himself cannot master the madman, he hangs the hangman on his own gallows and strangles the devil on his own gibbet.

And all these abominable crimes Guignol commits with frightful quickness, snorting and shrugging his shoulders and screaming with a triumphal laugh. Oh, the knave !

What depths of perversity still ferment in the human heart, that this sight, which brings out every bad instinct, yet contains a comic side so certain and so sure, and provides a recreation so attractive especially for the innocent—for these little children who do not

know evil, and for this servant of God, who approaches as much as possible to moral perfection?

I ask myself this question sadly, when Sister Séraphique—the representation being over—leaves her place near the window, and comes to my bedside a little confused.

“But what a bad man Guignol is,” she says. “What a rogue, what a good-for-nothing fellow! He beats and kills everybody. Is it possible that people amuse children with such horrid things? I myself feel quite ashamed to have been diverted by it.”

“So much the more, Sister,” said I, to tease her, “that you have also forgotten the hour for your meditation.”

And very quickly the sister reseated herself, took up her beads and her book and bent her head under her cap. Poor sister, she has a qualm for her late distraction, and to-morrow she will accuse herself at confession, I'll swear, of having looked at Guignol and taken pleasure in doing so. Reassure yourself, Sister, the fault is venial. Nevertheless, it is a wonder to me to see you, whose life is made up of obedience and goodness, amused for one moment at this low

type of human nature in which man is shown as he may become when not master of his passions, that is to say, as an impulsive brute capable of the most furious actions and the worst cruelties. In your ignorance, poor Sister, you laughed at *Guignol*—but I am sure you would cry bitterly at other marionettes of Society, who are greater hypocrites, but not less wicked or less scandalous.

It is not by hard strokes men get rid of their enemies, it is by much more dangerous and perfidious measures. Then I reflect that it is not useless that the poor sister has had those minutes of relaxation, and that she has seen the caricature of a rogue, and that she has laughed at it. She will reproach herself, redouble her zeal, and understand better than before the spirit of her vocation, which is to pray for others. For though strong-minded people dissent from it, this Christian faith which teaches that the prayers and works of the innocent mitigate and atone for, in the sight of God, the ignoble, the vile, the shameful actions, and even the crimes of the wicked; is a sublime sentiment, superior even to justice.

*August 19, 1897.*

III

Dear Bread



## Dear Bread

DEAR Bread ! Dearth. These simple words spoken to-day on all sides, spread a profound sensation. For no one can remain indifferent to this threatening news. It causes sorrow to all honest men, and even to the greatest egoists it causes something of fear. Some are moved to pity, others are uneasy. All are troubled. The question of the price of bread is the only one, in fact, that we cannot put off till to-morrow, saying, as we do to so many problems which come before us : "That can be settled later." In this case optimism and putting off, which are often only hypocritical manifestations of coldness and hardness of heart, are absolutely interdicted. Hunger does not admit of delay. There is urgency, with empty stomachs. In the sad hour when the empty begin to cry "Bread," the full are obliged to remember that if the famishing have nothing to eat, they are ready to bite.

We must take care. The tax on bread is the thermometer which indicates the patience of the poor. On the white bill of the baker, as on the buttress of the bridge, where the rise of the tide is marked, and the dates of celebrated inundations, one can note the precise moment when the anger of the hungry will boil over. A blight is on the land, the price of bread has been raised, and to-morrow it will doubtless be raised again. In a great part of France the harvest has been nothing ; all has been destroyed, cut to pieces, rotted by storms, and in the region which the hail has spared, it is still a bad year, a year of mean crops and poor sheaves. Our annual consumption is a hundred and twenty million hectolitres of wheat. We are, by the most favourable calculations, short of thirty millions.

This formidable dilemma imposes itself, either to maintain our law of customs, which seems almost impossible, for it would mean bread too scarce, or open our ports to the cheap cereals of America, and that is the ruin of agriculturists.

All that, without speaking of another danger still worse, that is to say, speculation in wheat, the

monopoly which the Convention sought of old to render punishable as a capital crime, but which the actual laws do not pursue, or punish very lightly, at least—when there is a coalition of monopolists, a coalition always easy to disguise. But if the monopoly—and it is, alas ! too probable—comes to complicate and aggravate the actual crises, everything is to be feared—even famine and its frightful consequences.

Forsooth, I hear the unctuous voices of the people who always reassure us say, “ You exaggerate. You alarm yourselves unnecessarily. There is no risk in delay. It is not the first time that one has seen bread at five sous the pound ! One sou more is very little. Besides, does bread hold such a large place in the household expenses of the labouring classes to-day ? Show me a workman who does not eat meat every day,” etc., etc.

Cannot one imagine one hears that great lady of the *ancien régime*, who, when it was said in her presence that the poor wanted bread, cried, “ Very well, let them eat cake ” ? People who talk to you in this soothing way have generally everything they want under the sun : solid yearly incomes, or some

good appointment. They are dressed in imposing habiliments, they occupy themselves with political economy, and will furnish you instantly with an octavo full of figures which will prove to you, clear as day, that the poor are to blame, and that if they remain in misery it is because they wish to do so.

They are terrible people. Do not try to insinuate to them that, if workmen do for the most part eat meat in order to resist the strain of work, you see on their table fewer legs of mutton and fillets of beef than thick soups, in which the spoon will almost stand up, and large dishes of potatoes ; that there are a great number of people, widows with orphan children, isolated workwomen, making only a very small living, whose principal food is bread, and who only have a bit of pork and salad as a luxury ; that a sou is a sou ; that five centimes the pound of bread a day makes eighteen francs at the end of the year ; and that five or six times eighteen francs —and in many poor families they consume daily five or six pounds of bread—make a very alarming total for small purses. Do not try to advance such enormities to an economist armed with his tables

of double entry and with statistics bristling with reports and cooked accounts. He gets angry, tells you that you understand nothing about it, and treats you as a sentimentalist, and perhaps a socialist.

Still the fact is there. Bread is dear, and if we do not promptly decide to make a break in this great wall of China in which we are shut up by the laws of protection, next winter the price of bread will be still higher. This last supposition is not admissible, for it would be a public danger. Certainly the end must be to diminish, at least momentarily, the customs on foreign wheat, which will be in other respects deplorable, and will be a hard blow to French agriculture, already so hard hit. But it must be done. Alas! that the world is so unwise. It is evident that the truth of the future is free exchange, and one ought, in spite of all, to hope that sooner or later, nations will adopt, to guide their economic relations, the formula of the Paris gamin, "Give me of what thou hast, and I will give thee of what I have."

In the meantime they are ferociously competing in the struggle, in the pitiless strife. They make

war less often with cannon-balls, though all the time they are ruining themselves in making cannon—yet they make a bitter war of tariffs. The only soldier who is of any use, in this time of useless armies, is the custom-house officer. Without the Méline laws, which ought to be finally approved—for our country is in a state of lawful defense—the United States will fire grape-shot of corn at us, will bombard us with sacks of flour, reducing our peasant to famine by gorging France with wheat, killing us with that which is life.

It need scarcely be said that mankind is rather stupid.

In fact, we are forced to do it.

Let us resign ourselves and leave the door ajar to the grain of America and Australia. Care, however! And if we wish to have bread, for the good of the poor, at four sous the pound, let us beware of the monopolists. But here the optimist comes forward again.

How can you say such a word, and what horrible recollections you bring back? As I listen to you, I think I see the heads of Foulon and Bertier being

carried past on the end of pikes with a mouthful of bloody straw between their lips. Monopoly of wheat, nowadays, it is impossible! You are mocking. There are no more monopolists.

Pardon, dear sir, there are some still. Everything can be done with millions, and the frenzy for gain is without end. You know, as well as I, in Paris, in the cosmopolitan world, several colossal fortunes, which recently have been augmented to scandalous proportions, and which have no other origin than speculation in cereals. You could name these unscrupulous men, for they are received and surrounded with consideration in the best society, and you yourself are highly flattered by shaking hands with them on the Bourse or at the club.

Ah! at this the optimist is a little angry, for I have offended the eternal idol—the golden calf.

But, very well, where is the harm, after all? Since when is the merchant forbidden to make provision of any commodity whatsoever, and not to sell until it has reached its highest price? With what do you definitely charge these millionaires? For having gambled? It is not a crime. With having won? It

was a chance. What would become of freedom of commerce if you had your way? . . . And so on.

I have nothing to reply, unless it is that, of all the stock-jobbing, that which is made on the food of the poor is the most abominable, and that it is odious to see an individual enrich himself by the misery of all. That one of these monopolists of wheat becomes one of the kings of Paris, that he has a princely hôtel and luxurious equipages, that he can live in one year at his châlet on the ocean during the dog-days, his shooting quarters during the autumn, and in winter his villa on the shore of the blue Mediterranean Sea. Do you know what this means? It means that millions of workpeople will carry only a small loaf of bread under their arms as they go to their work; it means that poor women can only put a very thin slice of bread in the baskets of their little children going to school; it means that mothers, exhausted by privation, only offer a half-empty breast to their debilitated and crying infants; it means, in a word, that a whole people shall suffer hunger.

No, no; wheat is not a merchandise, a commodity like any other, and the evil-doer who, by I know

not what infamous negotiation, has raised the price of corn and rye, and has transformed into bullion the copper sous of the poor, deserves that every morsel of bread that he puts into his mouth should taste bitter and repellant, the taste of tears and blood! Bread is sacred! What shame for a proud civilization that human beings should be in want of it a single day!

“*Panem nostrum quotidianum!*” I have repeated many times all these days that beautiful prayer; for in the course of my long illness I have come back to the “old song,” as M. Jaurès says; and not only does it lull with an infinite softness those who suffer, but it gives them courage and hope. All is contained in that admirable “*Pater noster*,” even the solution of the social problem, “*Panem quotidianum.*” Yes; it is all that man ought to ask of life and to expect from it. If we remembered better the teaching given nearly two thousand years ago on the Mount, if we really loved one another as the Lord Jesus wished, we should be very near the kingdom of Justice, the kingdom of God.

August 26, 1897.\*



IV

## The River



## The River

HALFWAY up the wooded hill, the path which descends between the hedges and the beech-trees suddenly widens, and the deep carpet of the dead leaves of last autumn becomes soft under the foot of him who walks. Certainly the edge of the forest cannot be far off. Already it is no longer the dusty ground where the rose and the heather flourish ; it is no longer the severe and silent forest. What sudden freshness ! One enters the underwood of very tender green. Under the intermingled leafage the wild herbs are higher, the velvet mosses are thicker and heavier, and here and there around is seen the sickly paleness of mushrooms. In the thicket, what songs of birds, what a rustling of wings ! Surely there must be water near ! How tiresome ! A cloud has obscured the sun. Redwings and chaffinches are silent for a minute. Do you not hear this slight sound, this clear

murmur? Let us penetrate through the wood. Beware of the branches, and be careful not to slip on the spongy turf. Look! Near that heap of greenish stones some watercresses are quivering. And, further off, do you not see that thin line of limpid silver which twists and turns like a frightened adder?

You are there . . . it is the spring. In a few days, this pure and icy water, which one fills the palm of the hand with, and sucks with the delicious sensation that one is drinking Innocence, will reach the Atlantic, and will mingle with the strong and briny waves of a vast estuary—will glide round the lifebuoys which mark with their great vermillion-painted circles the rocks of the roadstead. It will ripple gently on the wet, shell-covered sides of the enormous cargo boats in the harbour of the great river.

How exquisite at its source is this small thread of water, which is going so far and corrupting itself, alas! in the course of its way! It presents even the symbol of truth. Which of us, running through the woods, after having quenched our thirst at a spring, has not stopped a moment, drawn, as it were, by a charm near it, and there—rocked by its murmur, admiring

its limpid brightness—has not involuntarily dreamed of childhood and maidenhood? In the meantime, in descending the hill under the grass in its flight from reptiles, the rivulet has gathered other rivulets, it has grown larger from invisible sources. See it here in the hollow of a dale.

How weak it still is, this little watercourse. A plank is enough by which to cross it, and in dry summers one sees in its bed here and there hardly anything but mud and stones; nevertheless, it is towards it that secretly the subterranean waters flow. It now passes through rich pastures. The willows grow on its banks, and the old stumps, in double line, spread out their pale foliage. Now and then a cow, heavy and clumsy, comes down from the neighbouring pasture into the running water; drinks, lifts up her dripping mouth, and looks into the horizon with an air of astonishment.

It is only a little further on, at the meeting of three valleys, which bring to it their liquid tribute, that the humble stream becomes a little river.

Geography has already given it a name, the illustrious name which it will keep when bearing the

imposing ships on its waters, and when it resists the impetuous efforts of the tide.

But now it is only an adolescent rivulet, which is spanned by the old one-arched stone bridges, and which keeps its country grace. It flows slowly under the interlaced branches of the elms and aspens, and its calm water, darkened by the thick foliage, reflects the blue of the kingfisher as he flies.

In the spring there is a very fine concert in the bushes on each bank, and the azure dragon-flies, poised in groups on the rose-bushes, seem to be the notes of the music which the winged artists sing.

The young stream, hardly yet deep enough for a boat, is very solitary. At the most here and there, in a punt tied to the trunk of a tree, one perceives a waistcoat of drill, the point of a grey beard under a straw hat, a long fishing-rod, at the end of the line a little float—the only bit of red in all the green—which moves here and there quite softly among the large leaves of the water-lilies. But the young stream becomes rapidly adult, and its mass of water, ever more and more abundant, begins to do its useful work. When it passes near a village it hears the

laughing chatter and the rhythmic beating of the bare-armed washerwomen, and it carries away the variegated soap-bubbles. Its first works preserve an innocent and pastoral character. It is with a sort of happy complaisance that it enters the watercourse of the mill; that it throws itself against the heavy wheel, and falls from it in a cascade with happy joyousness; that it amuses itself with balancing on its waves, agitated for an instant by the fall, a merry squadron of ducks.

Suddenly, at the turning of the hill, it receives its first affluent. Twice as large and deep, it now deserves to be called a river. It goes calmly and laboriously, for from henceforth it carries ships. On its steep banks, by the side of the quivering poplars, the horses with loose collars drag the empty boats up the river, and on the bright-coloured pinnaces coming down the river the sailors are singing. It goes, winding gracefully, sometimes squeezed between the vine-clad hills, sometimes taking its ease across the pastures. Villages multiply along its fertile banks, and the church-steeple, quiet as old men, look at it passing by. It flows on. It absorbs a river, then again

another. Further, where, on the horizon, one sees the silhouetted of a lock-keeper, a canal enriches it with its captive waters. It goes, this noble river; it passes through illustrious cities. Obstructed with pontoons, hulks, and craft of all sorts, it flows with more impetuosity, and flings itself grumbling under the sonorous arches of the monumental bridges, and above the crowded and tumultuous quays, the spires of the old churches throw their trembling reflections on its flood. Then it shoots forth again into the open country, and presents its mirror to all the enchantment of the sky. Under the ardent light of summer it glistens and sparkles. Dawn strews it with roses, the setting sun with topaz and carbuncles, and in the blue night it seems to follow an enchanted dream in the melancholy of the moonlight.

The river is now in all its force and majesty. But what has become of the clear, pure water of its source? Since it first flowed over the dirty moss all its contacts with man have soiled it. How many drains have disgorged into it their mire and refuse! The manufactories of the suburbs, whose high brick chimneys stand by the side of the river, have slowly

and constantly directed towards it their streams of poison. Old pieces of gold, old jewels, old arms in its bed, that it has stirred up in passing, tell the tale of murders many centuries old. In the night unfortunate people have plunged from off its solitary bridges, and into its black depths assassins have thrown the bleeding corpses of their victims. Sometimes, as if suffering from nausea, it throws up on its banks hideous and putrid remains; but it is infected for ever. Like the conscience of a rogue, it carries in its waters, with some ignored and lost treasures, impurity, disgrace, and crime.

At last the river is at the end of its course. Here is the estuary; and it is so vast that, down there, quite far, at anchor near the vague and distant bank, the ships which have been round the world, which have ploughed the indigo seas under flaming skies, and those whose hard bows have splintered the glaciers of ice in the midst of terrible darkness; the graceful three-masters, the powerful steamers, seem like frail cockle-shells rigged with spiders' webs. The last beacon is now passed, and on the grey shore the white towers of the lighthouses, quite small, are hardly

visible. The enormous liquid mass, that the movement of the tide repulses and draws by turns, now bristles with little waves irritated by the struggle, and now and then precipitates itself forward with rapid glidings.

In the offing, from whence the wind brings a confused clamour, the deep surges shake their mane of foam, rushing and blocking up the foggy horizon, and great sea-gulls with angels' wings move over the river with sharp cries, and seem like sinister messengers of the abyss which is going to engulf it.

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I know a soul comparable to this stream. In the same way in which the stream is going to be lost in the sea, the soul will soon disappear in death. In the same way as the stream approaches the gulf, it feels full of all its past, and is deep and bitter—deep as memory, bitter as experience. It "recalls its life, which was in all peaceable and even beneficent, though what stains has it not received on its way, this poor soul, and will carry for ever! For the water which flows, and for the man who lives, there is only one moment of absolute purity, the spring, and

infancy. As the stream rolls and hides in the mire of its bed impurities and corpses, the soul—even of the least guilty—is full of shameful secrets.

To remain pure in this world is an impossible and hopeless effort; to become so again in a new life, what an ideal, what a sublime hope! This stream which the sea sucks in purifies itself in the salt of the immense ocean. Poor soul, blighted by existence and profoundly troubled on the border of the grand mystery, thou darest dream, thou also, of immortal innocence! That is why thou dreamest to-day of all those old church towers which the stream has reflected on its waters, and which thou hast so often met on thy journey without obeying their solemn call. That is why thou at last repliest to the signal of those ancient spires of stone which point with confidence to heaven, and command prayer and faith.

*Sept. 2, 1897.*



v

## Farewells to a House



## Farewells to a House

THE day my surgeon and friend, Doctor Duch-  
astelet, who has twice saved my life this  
year, announced to me that I should in future be  
a man who ought to be looked after and obliged  
to take great care and precaution; and incapable  
especially of jumping into a train at the last moment,  
and going backwards and forwards between the Rue  
Oudinet and Mandres, as I had been accustomed  
to do the last few sunniers, I was overwhelmed, I  
admit, with sadness. A saunterer, who was ordered  
to keep indoors; a frequenter of the ~~streets~~ of Paris,  
who was condemned to become domestic, could not  
at first be in a very happy humour. More. The  
first consequence of this medical edict was the neces-  
sity of getting rid of the modest but very pleasant  
retreat in the country, where I, an old citizen, had  
learnt at last, after several years, to distinguish an

elm from a lime, and the rolling note of yellow-hammer from the capricious music of the black-cap.

My heart was rather full the other day as I talked to the lawyer of Brunoy, and arranged, with his good advice, the text of the notice and the date of the auction. But it must be believed that I have nothing in common with the bourgeois of Gavarni gaping open-mouthed with admiration at "his wall," and preparing, doubtless, to set it with traps, and to cover the top with broken glass bottles; for I soon accustomed myself to the thought that in a few weeks my house would belong to another, and that I should only possess as real property the rectangle of ground situate in the cemetery of Montparnasse, where I was very nearly, at the end of July last, definitely domiciled. Well, it is quite true, I have the instinct of a landed proprietor in a very feeble degree. In the outside world I estimate that to see is to have, and I am disposed to enjoy as fully, on the high-road, the beauties of Nature as in the centre of some acres of land acquired by my own money, and protected from all invasion less by fences than by the threat of penal servitude.

Still it would be a mistake to suppose I did not love my country home, and that I quitted it without regret and without melancholy, although the sentiments which rule me more and more make long reliance less and less difficult. It must be hard to be obliged to sell one's family place, and I cannot imagine a sadder separation. To wander for the last time under the shade of the old trees planted by your forefathers ; to gather, before departure to dry in one's mother's Book of Hours, a rose from the rose tree, that formerly the poor lady had pruned with her own hands ; to get up from, and never again to sit down in, the old armchair in the chimney corner in which one's father had dozed during the long October evenings ; to go and look round the rooms furnished with beds and cots, which recall the birth and death of so many loved ones. Shutting, knowing that it will henceforth only be opened by a stranger, the door of the family sitting-room, on which is marked in pencil your height at various times in your childhood ; leaving those walls where your affections cling even closer than the roots of the ivy. Abandoning the flowers which seem to give you in their perfume a little of the spirit of the

beloved departed—that must certainly be a great grief—one of those hours of sentimental agony when man finds how much truth and depth there is in the *sunt lacrymae rerum* of the poet.

I have not known this uprooting. My poor parents, working bees in the great city, lived from time to time in one or another of those beehives which the houses of Paris are. They were often obliged to move, and all that remains to me of them—very humble relics—are two or three very old pieces of furniture, spared at the removals.

Between the tears of adieu, shed on the family hearth, and the lighter pain of seeing the roof under which one has passed several happy summers fade from view, comparison would be absurd, but still the griefs are of the same kind.

Yes, I left a little bit of my life in that pretty Fraizièrc.

I had meant to give myself this little park—as a reward for much hard work—this little park which seems a corner of Trianon, those large trees from whence in May and June the winged orchestra gave me delicious concerts, those narrow alleys where I

loved to walk slowly in the falling night, amongst the scents of mignonette; the large kitchen garden, where the weight of the fruit in the golden days of autumn made the boughs crack, and where the grapes reddened on the walls among the powdered and rusty leaves; those lines of roses on high stems, where in the season it was like a competition between all the queens of beauty.

Those things were dear to me. I had filled them with my dreams, I had given them much of my heart. I was obliged to separate myself from them. A wearisome accident of health obliged me for the future to keep near certain succour, and my carnations, and my redwings are too far from the surgeon's help. Another will possess them. I hope he will attach himself to them; that he will even, perhaps, have the illusion that the flowers which perfumed the walks of a poet, exhale an odour the more exquisite, and that the birds which sang to charm him, carol the most melodious songs.

I sincerely wish the new master of la Fraizi  re a happy sojourn; I hope that the shades may become even more cool for him, the trees more green, the

fruits more sweet, the borders more brilliant and more perfumed. I wish, above all, that he may become fond of the old place. But I do not promise to visit him, for I own my weakness—I should be sorry that, when I was there, the new master should listen to my choir of chaffinches and blackbirds, and smell my harem of "Madame Bérard" and of "Gloire de Dijon," I should feel something like a retrospective jealousy, and I should suffer once more from the indifference of nature in ordaining that birds sing for it matters not who, like court poets, and that roses smell sweet for the first-comer. Once more I wish all possible felicity to my unknown successor. That in the leafy study, from the height of his plaster column, the laughing face of the young fawn may greet him with a hospitable smile, and as the rain of this sad summer must certainly have partly erased the inscription on the marble of the sundial that is in the middle of the kitchen garden (too philosophical and funereal)—*Ultima latet*, the last hour is hidden from us,—I advise a new owner to substitute this one, the exact expression of my wishes for him: *Horas non numero nisi serenas*. I only count happy hours.

May happiness remain at Fraizi  re ! But I shall not again enter that door over which fall an elder tree's white flowers. In future that door will have the hostile face, for me, of a woman one has loved, and whom one meets on the arm of another : and in seeing again the house I had left I could not resist murmuring the heartrending verse of *La Tristese d'Olympio* : " My house looks at me and knows me not."

Still, I shall never be quite a stranger to the old home, for something of us, more than a remembrance, remains in a place which has been a sweet resting-place, and which we have loved. Let my fancy be permitted to look for some traces left by the first inhabitant who settled himself in this happy corner of nature, and to imagine also some vestiges that may be found in time to come, of him who leaves it to-day.

When I spent the month of May for the first time at la Fraizi  re, I felt very happy that my garden was full of nightingales, and that they sang divinely. Now, some old people of the neighbourhood had told me that formerly, before 1830, when there was only a tiny house and a cluster of trees, it belonged to an excellent violinist, an old conductor of the Opera orchestra.

I do not know why I associated in my own mind the virtuoso and the singing birds, but I invented for myself a picture of the old man dressed in the fashion of the time, in tight pantaloons, in shoes with buckles, cramped up in a white cravat thrice round his neck, and in the high collar of the coat *à la Goethe*. I picture him to myself sitting in his house near a window opening on the green, before a portfolio of music, his bow in his hand, the Stradivarius on his shoulder, trying to drive away the ennui of his retreat by recalling his old success in concerts, and executing with admirable *maestria* a piece of great difficulty, an instrumental *tour de force*—the famous variations on the air of the “Carnival de Venise,” for instance.

Then the idle fancy passed through my mind that the nightingales, put on their mettle, and driven by the spirit of emulation, wished to prove to the old artist that they were as strong as he, that their song was worth as much as his violin, and that they were capable of reviving in their throats the prodigies on the fourth string accomplished by the illustrious Paganini—and that in this musical contest they had

shot their guns of song with more hardihood and agility, suspended their "silences" more lightly, redoubled their tender modulations, and prolonged their loving sighs.

No doubt, I said to myself, that the old conductor of the orchestra died a long time ago, and that many generations of birds had disappeared. It did not matter! I wished to believe that in my lime trees the tradition was preserved, that the little birds only just hatched received there an excellent musical education, and I justified thus my pretension—very worthy of a proprietor—of having in my garden nightingales which sang better than others.

There is still a remembrance of the old violinist, I doubt not, in the nests at la Frazière. As for me, I have marked my sojourn there by multiplying as much as I could the very beautiful rose of dark purple—so velvety, and with a most delicate odour—that a neighbouring horticulturist had the good grace to name after me.

In those flowers which I love, a part of my spirit remains; in those branches, where there is a fluttering of wings, there remains, also, a bit of the soul of the

virtuoso who made the birds jealous, and in the beautiful spring mornings the glory and the beauty of the rose of the poet is celebrated in songs sung by the great-great-grandsons of the rivals of the old musician.

*Sept. 19, 1897.*

VI

## Missionaries



## Missionaries

A YOUNG man whom I love with all my heart, and who, drawn by an irresistible vocation, intends soon to become a priest of the Foreign Missions, addressed to me at the time he was taking priest's orders and pronouncing the supreme vow, a letter which profoundly moved me. This pious boy—I have rarely met such an enthusiastic and pious soul—wrote to me that in a few days, at the moment of his mystical espousals, when he should be prostrated, humble and frail victim, on the flagstones of the Church—he would pray for me, and he asked me in exchange to remember him at the decisive moment of his life.

I will not wait for that hour to proclaim before all, and very loudly, to what an extent my young friend seemed enviable to me, in the ardour and sincerity of his faith. For, even in the eyes of the incredulous—

and when I pronounce that word it is not, thanks be to God, of myself that I speak,—even to the eyes of the incredulous, I say, the missionary is admirable.

In fact, not only does he accept in all its severity, the rule imposed on priests and religious, but more, he renounces, without hope of ever again seeing, his country, his parents, and every one he holds dear. He goes away for ever, to live in frightful climates, among barbarians and savages. He presents himself to them alone and without defence, having only his guardian angel as escort, and armed only with courage and the Gospel. To those savages, trembling with terror before threatening idols, he speaks of a God of Love, Who wills to be worshipped in spirit and in truth. To those beings governed only by their appetites, he claims to teach Christian morality, which subdues evil instincts, and to inculcate new virtues of which he gives at the same time the example. The spirit of war and hate is the normal condition of these unhappy people ; the missionary requires that they should pardon their enemies, and says to them at first, “ Peace be with you.”

Their first action is that of theft and rapine ; the

missionary orders them to be charitable and to despise the goods of this world. They live in almost the intercourse of brutes ; the missionary invites them to chaste family life. They make slaves of the conquered, and traffic in human flesh ; the missionary declares to them that all men are brothers in Jesus Christ, and enjoins them to break the chains and fetters.

What perils there are for this priest, full of meekness, who can only plead the Cross, to the hideous army raised against him on every side ! Often he falls, struck down before arriving at the first halting-place of his apostolic journey, before having even made one convert. But long ago he sacrificed his life, he is resigned to torture and death. What do I say ? He desires, he hopes for his glorious death, and he accepts it with delight, convinced that the blood of a martyr is more fruitful in an ungodly land than even the water of baptism, and that the Name of that God, in Whose Name he trusts in his torture, will not be forgotten by the tormentors who are struck by his heroism, and whom he blesses as he expires.

Yes, even the unbeliever in all future life, even he

who has no hope—if he keeps even the feeling for goodness—cannot refuse to give the missionary his emotion and his respect.

I recall them very far back in my memory, those priests of foreign missions, for in the corner of the Faubourg Saint Germain, where I was born—nearly fifty-six years ago—and where I still live, one meets them frequently on the broad pavement of the Rue de Sèvres, or amongst the crowd in the Rue du Bac. When I was little, they excited my infantine curiosity in the highest degree. I thought them so different from other ecclesiastics. Their dark complexions, their large beards, their quick and fearless step, which made their cassocks shake, and in their whole person a certain amount of manliness, or, so to say, soldierly bearing, all filled me with surprise. Some of them—one knows that often in their distant missions they render great service to France—had medals like soldiers.

Occasionally, in front of a furnished house of clerical appearance, which the invading construction of the Bon Marché has long caused to disappear, I saw an old bishop get out of a carriage, wearing the

green and gold cord round the Roman hat, and the pectoral cross, which shone through the silver of a patriarchal beard. And the good people of that quarter said to each other respectfully the name of the tropical bishop and that of his diocese among the blacks on the borders of Africa, or among the yellow skins in the depths of frightful Asia.

From the aspect of these travelled priests I, schoolboy as I then was, dreamt of the vast seas, and of the mysterious countries indicated on my atlas, dreamt of long voyages, of shipwrecks on unknown islands, extraordinary adventures among savages armed with clubs, and with head-dresses of feathers like a shuttlecock. The good fathers did not think of it, but they made me live in imagination, when I was about twelve years old, twenty existences like that of Robinson Crusoe or of Captain Cook.

These priests, who for long appeared to me bathed in the poetry of my childish memories, I have seen quite close lately, in one of the most solemn hours of their religious lives, one of their pupils, the excellent young man of whom I spoke just now, having made

me assist at the moving ceremony of a departure of missionaries.

I shall not try to give a description of it after Louis Veuillot, and I can only refer my readers to the very beautiful pages on the subject that are to be found in *Cé et là*.

May I be permitted only to note the impression, one of the most acute, which has touched my heart. At first it was in the bare garden under the foggy autumn sky. The high windows of the old building—a noble house in the French style of other days—seemed to look down peacefully upon the priests and laymen who were hastening along the narrow alleys bordered with box, at the call of a large Chinese gong, barbarous and cracked. In an angle of the garden the image of the Virgin was placed, radiant in the golden light of many tapers. Before her the ten “Partants” were praying. I saw from afar their backs, their shoulders, and the nape of their necks, bent as if offering them already to the blade of the executioner. They sang the soft litanies kneeling, and the assistants, standing, replied in chorus with the *Ora pro nobis*. But when they invoked the Queen of

the Apostles, the Queen of Martyrs, the Queen of Confessors, all fell on their knees amongst the dead leaves, and I felt then a holy emotion pass over that crowd and through my own heart. Yes, we then felt by a reflex action and by sympathy with the young men who were devoting themselves to death, something of the Agony of the Lord Jesus, on the eve of His Sacrifice, in the tragic night under shadow of the olive trees.

Still this was not the most pathetic moment of the solemnity.

After the litanies were finished, we followed the "Partants" into the chapel, which is cold and without ornament. "Sombre and severe were also the words of the Father Superior, who, in the name of the whole congregation, said good-bye to them in this world for ever. In terms of rare firmness he insisted on this adieu, repeating to the travellers that they started without a thought of return, that they were leaving their country and their families for ever, and that the separation was positive, complete, absolute.

In the stalls and the galleries of the church were the friends and relations of the young missionaries.

But they, standing impassive, their eyes looking downwards, their arms crossed on their breasts, with manly energy listened without a gesture, without a sigh, without even a movement of the eyelids, to the speaker, who repeated constantly the word "adieu," and recalled to them over and over again that the sacrifice was irreparable.

It was very simple, it was very terrible. When the Superior had finished his address, the "Partants" came and arranged themselves in a single line before the altar. They were then full of strength and youth, and seemed to await massacre. All at once I thought of the hostages of the Commune facing, the bullets of the Fédérés.

Then began the most touching act of the imposing ceremony. All the assistants passed in turn before the missionaries and kissed their feet first, then their faces—on the feet, to wish them a good journey and a large harvest of souls among the heathen; on both cheeks, in token of brotherly kindness and eternal adieu.

I was accompanied by a young poët, a friend of mine. We did not hesitate, either one of us, to

accomplish the rite ; for those who have a little of the ideal in their hearts, bow their heads without effort before what is really great, and we both had our eyes full of tears as we left the embrace of those knight-errants of the faith, who had clasped us to their hearts with a happy smile and recommended themselves to our prayers.

My prayers ! You asked for them in your turn, dear boy, who are engaging in the service of God to-day, with eternal promises, and whom, if I am still in this world next year, I shall go and embrace in the Church of the Missions.

My prayers ! I had long ago forgotten them, and it took many months of illness and suffering to make me whisper them again, and push away with disgust all the old enigmas set before my reason, and passionately stretch out my hands to a Heavenly Father, to Whose mysterious will I desire for the future to submit. But, alas ! in spite of my efforts to fill my heart with humble confidence, I am destined, I feel, to suffer a great deal again from doubt, and many a time I shall have need to say to myself the words that Pascal dared to use to God Himself :

"Thou wouldest not have looked for me if Thou hadst not already found me."

My prayers! It is yours that I have need of, pious and intrepid boy. Yours and those of your friends of the foreign missions; of those admirable Christians, who, in imitation of the Life of Christ, have chosen by preference His Passion and His Death, and whom I have seen, in an hour that I can never forget, standing before the altar in the attitude of victims, ready for the Cross, and offering their open hands to the nails of the executioner, and their sides to the soldier's lance.

*Sept. 23, 1897.*

VII

## Above the Clouds



## Above the Clouds

IN a year, not bad as years go, but in an exceptionally foggy January, I had to spend a week at Geneva. It is in winter, under a sad and dark sky, that the Calvinistic Rome shows its true face ; and to have visited it in beautiful weather, as tourists do, is not to know it. What memories can they have, in fact ? The unequalled scenery of the lake and mountains, the luxurious hotels on the quays, the elegant shops of the Coratterie, the cosmopolitan crowd of passengers on the bridge of boats of Lausanne. That is about all. The memory of Calvin has nothing very attractive. Few people are tempted to look for traces of the strict sectarian in the narrow lanes of the old town, and under the pointed arches of Saint-Pierre, and the traveller only carries away from Geneva the superficial impression of a rich and beautiful city, situated in a grand and enchanting country.

To feel the cold but intense poetry of the ancient capital of the Reformation, one must find one's self there, on the contrary, in the depth of winter, when the rigour of the temperature is in accordance with the local manners, and when the north wind blows sharp as controversy.

The Léman hides itself in the fog, as if its voluptuous blue feared to offend the Huguenot prudery, and the skeletons of the trees are as dry as a sermon. It is then that one must climb up the dark and damp streets of the high town. There are there little solitary places, where an old stripped elm stands alone at the top of an ancient stone stair; and without having much imagination, one can fancy one will see Calvin himself appear in black dress and cap, holding a big Bible with clasps under his emaciated arm, and murmuring through his pointed beard some malediction against heretics and libertines.

The Rue des Granges, the Geneva Faubourg St. Germain, is also in this dark quarter of the city, and there, in the old houses, live very rich and very devout mummies, who the whole year round say their prayers and practise economy.

If one afterwards descends into the modern part of the town, and if one mixes with the active crowd in the commercial streets, one finds on many faces the same caricature of harsh austerity. The women, enveloped in furs and veils, seem to hide their beauty as if it was an object of scandal ; and on the threshold of the Bourse one sees gentlemen with a grave and collected air, who are bankers talking together on the currency of bills, but whom one could easily take for learned doctors of divinity in exciting discussion on the interpretation of a text of Scripture.

May the good Genevese pardon the innocent malice of this sketch. I do not forget the cordial welcome they gave me in former times, when I went to say my verses to them, and the precious sympathy I gathered among them. Who does not, moreover, esteem and admire that hospitable and studious city, the city of intelligence and liberty, the natural asylum of so many exiles of free thought ?

But the citizens of Geneva will agree that winter is fierce on the banks of the Léman. My shivering, and my physical distress were then excusable on this January morning, when I saw, as soon as I awoke,

an atmosphere of despair and suicide through the window-panes, an abominable fog which smelt of soot, and which penetrated even into the rooms. Suddenly the friend, whose guest I was, came into the room, and said to me gaily—

“Would you like to see the sun?”

At first I thought it a bad joke. But no; nothing was more easy. It was only necessary to get into a carriage and have one's self driven to a certain height on the side of the Salève, to go up on foot a few turnings on the mountain road, and one found one's self above the fog, one saw the sun and the blue sky. Let us be just. Here was a pleasure that could not be offered in mid-winter in Paris, or even at Montmartre, on the top of the towers of the Sacré-Cœur.

I accepted with joy, you may be sure, this seductive offer, and half an hour after we were seated in a very comfortable landau, but in which a thick steam covered the glasses, isolating us from the outer world. We rolled along for some time, first trotting, then walking, only conscious of the ascent by the efforts of the horses, which one feels easily inside a carriage. When ours stopped, we got out in the midst of clouds.

The cold pinched, ten paces before one nothing was to be seen. In the first place, one was obliged to look at the ground to prevent stumbling in the ruts, or in the half-frozen mud. Right and left the trunks of the trees showed themselves, but as if enveloped in cotton wool. Though I was at that time a fairly strong walker—alas! I cannot say as much now—the ascent seemed to me rough. One sweated under one's coat; one panted, one blew—my companion and I—by the mouth and nostrils, a triple jet of steam, which at once disappeared in the fog. Still leaning on our sticks, and walking slowly with the long stride of the alpine climber, we went on, and we got higher little by little amid the white vapour.

At last it became less thick, it was coloured with a slight rose tint—a sort of presentiment of the sun. The goal was getting nearer. Now we distinguished the wet grass of the slopes, the stonecrop covered bark of the oaks, the verdure of the evergreen bushes. At length, in front of us, the tops of the fir-tree's sprang up out of the haze, and above our heads a beautiful blue and tender light spread itself. It was the sky, we were above the clouds!

I might live a hundred years—which I do not desire, and which would be on the whole absurd and scandalous—without forgetting the joy, the enchantment, the intoxication, which entered and penetrated me at this marvellous spectacle.

We found ourselves at the point of a sort of promontory, and on all sides an immense gulf opened and developed itself before us, of the colour of milk, which was the cloud we had passed through, and at the bottom of which was Geneva and its lake.

From this sea of vapour ascended cries, calls, the rolling of carriages, sometimes the shrill whistle of the railway-engine, all the noise of a great city. I dreamed then of the mysterious Atlantis, and I be-thought me of the legend of the city of Is, engulfed in the waters of Morbihan, whose bells the sailors think they hear in their peril.

In front of us, and so to say on the other bank, the chain of the Juras emerged from the clouds, quite white, whilst on our right the milky ocean lost itself in the horizon and melted in insensible shades into the pale blue of the sky. Occasionally a gull from the Léman soared up from the foggy depth,

flew for a minute or two with outspread wings in the full light, and then precipitated itself again into the cloud with a harsh cry, as if to scoff at the inhabitants of the great city who were creeping at the bottom of the gulf. Nothing was more fantastic than that white sea in which the birds dived and plunged about without ceasing. On all these marvels, a winter sun, clear and cold, looked down triumphantly from the centre of the sky, spreading a purple glimmer of a glorious tint on the snowy peaks, and making the wet green around us sparkle as with jewels.

Yes, I always remember the delicious beatings of my heart, my deep sigh of enthusiasm, when, after the painful journey through the dark and unwholesome fog, I was all at once in the presence of this fairyland of Nature, and remained quite dazzled by so much splendour and so much purity.

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Why then does the remembrance, already so distant, of this admirable and perhaps unique sensation of my life haunt me to-day with so much persistence?

Ah, it is because I have just suffered dreadfully,

and I suffer still every day. It is because now the winter of life has come to me—old age and its infirmities.

Not long ago, when this decay made me despair, and I choked in a fog of darkness, the fatherly hand of a friend was placed in mine, and he ordered me with kind firmness to start on the road and to rise to the light. How happy I am to have once more found a little of my childlike mind and my childish prayers! Oh, the sweetness of being humble, having confidence, and obeying. Hardly had I mounted the first step, when already the mist of pride and impurity which hid the right path disappeared.

Higher, my soul! Always higher! Above all that we see is heaven! What a remembrance have I recalled just now? On the mountain I only went up towards the sun. To-day I rise towards a light incomparably more brilliant, for, according to the beautiful words of Michael Angelo, “The sun is only the shadow of God.”

VIII

A Memory of my Mother



## A Memory of my Mother

YESTERDAY, in trying to put the litter in my library a little in order, I found the old book in which my mother taught me to read.

This "Life of Saint Louis," published at the beginning of the Restoration, this volume, roughly bound in calf, was given as a prize to my mother when she was at school. This remembrance of my youth was also a witness of hers. I ran through the yellow pages in which I began to spell with such slowness and effort, the words to which she pointed with her knitting-needle, and suddenly I began to dream that long ago a little girl bent her head studiously over the same pages, and that that little girl was my mother. Strange thing! This thought that my mother was once a child came upon me for the first time in my life, and surprised me almost as much as it moved me.

My mother was nearly forty when she brought me into the world. She had, in her youth, much brilliancy and brightness, I was told; but the only portrait which exists of her, was taken a few years before her death, and, in my most distant recollection, her well-beloved face appeared to me already touched with age. Do those who have known their mother young and beautiful feel a particular delight in remembering her so? I do not know; but, according to my ideas, those are privileged who first saw leaning over their cradles a face marked by the cares of life, and to whom their mother seemed always an old mother. The remembrance that they have of her is, if not dearer, at least more sacred, and what is venerable in age adds to what is sacred in motherhood.

This poor little book, in which my mother taught to me the difficult art of reading, this book, which she herself possessed at the time she was a school-child, made me remember that she had been a little girl. But I cannot imagine her games and work as a child, any more than her dreams as a young girl, or her joys as a much-loved wife.

I wish to see in her only my mother, my old mother.

It seems to me that I should not keep the fourth commandment, "Honour thy father and mother," and that a little of the tender respect with which I surround the dear picture of my mother would vanish if I represented her to myself for a single instant otherwise than as a mother, and with the first grey hairs and the few wrinkles that she already had when I was quite a little child. It would need an exquisite and light pen, which I have not, it would need aerial words to express this pious and jealous sentiment, this delicate scruple, this shade of mind.

I cannot give an idea of it, but by recalling the mystery of the Christian faith, so touching and so deep, which surrounds the Mother of Christ with an ideal purity.

Yes, for him whose heart is really filial, his mother is immaculate.

And is it not natural that I think of her only as a mother, for to her I was never anything but a child?

When ~~she~~ died she was seventy-one, and I was thirty-three. I was a man—a man having lived, worked, enjoyed, suffered, twenty times gone through the flames of passion, a man who had remained faithful to his principal duties, but guilty of many faults, and, alas! without innocence. Without doubt my mother knew it.

Knowing my efforts, she tried to encourage me; knowing my weakness, she tried to excuse it; she had taken part in my joys, had consoled me in my hours of distress. But if as a woman of manly intelligence, and of good sound judgment, she spoke to me as a man when I asked her advice, I became again to her—adorable illusion—her child—her poor little child, when I wanted only her love.

It is not that I only remember minutes when I was weak from pain, and when I only found comfort in embracing my mother, and in drying my eyes wet with tears on her cheeks, at the time when she carried me in her arms. No, it was in the ordinary course of life, it was in the thousand nothings of every day, that my excellent mother treated me as in my

first youth, and attributed to me naïvely, imprudence and awkwardness.

“Mind the step at the bottom of the stairs. . . . Take care not to catch cold. . . . I am sure you have again forgotten your pocket-handkerchief.”

I pity those who receive these little recommendations with impatience and without a smile of affection.

They always moved me to the bottom of my heart. Yet perhaps I was the object of these minute cares more than most people, for in my youth I went through several rather serious illnesses; and my mother was always anxious about me, not only as a child, but as a sick child.

One winter the doctors sent me to the south, but after some months spent away from her I found my poor mother so changed that the following year, being again ill, I stayed in Paris, and I there lived a prisoner during the bad weather.

My mother, already very decrepit, very feeble, never left, so to say, my room.

Let me be permitted to transcribe a very old distich. I never read over my old verses. Yet

these are always engraved on my memory. They recall hours so sweet, hours of perfect well-being in that atmosphere of maternal tenderness.

J'écris près de la lampe. Il fait bon. Rien ne bouge,  
Toute petite, en noir, dans le grand fauteuil rouge,  
Tranquille auprès du feu, ma vicille mère est là.  
Elle songe sans doute au mal qui m'exila,  
Loin d'elle, l'autre hiver, mais sans trop d'épouvante ;  
Car je suis sage et reste au logis, quand il vente.  
Et puis, se souvenant qu'en octobre la nuit  
Peut fraîchir, vivement et sans faire de bruit,  
Elle met une bûche au foyer plein de flammes.  
Ma mère, sois bénie entre toutes les femmes !

Just now I murmured these verses, as I turned over the leaves of the book where my mother showed me my letters, and looked for, and kissed the traces of her fingers.

Yet what trouble, what grief, I caused that admirable woman ! Not that she could have doubted my respect and my love for a single minute. Great God ! But one is young, one flings one's self into life, pushed by the sharp wind of desire, and one forgets that there is, sitting by the too often abandoned family hearth, a poor old woman. Oh ! full of infinite indulgence, who hardly dares address

a timid word of reproach to her big son—but who alarms herself about the danger he runs, who suffers to see him lose his frankness and purity—and who weeps!

May this page fall into the hands of a young man and stop him on the brink of a serious fall. If he knew what a bitterness it is afterwards to the soul, at the decline of life, to remember that though one has not been a bad man, that though one has nothing essential to reproach one's self with, yet one has made one's mother weep!

My mother has been dead more than twenty years, and I have still the heart of a son, but that day something delicious was extinguished in me, and since then I have never felt young. Never have I so often recalled the memory of my mother, as during the illness and long convalescence which inspired me with such serious meditations. It is as I whispered, after so many years, the prayers my mother taught me in my infancy, that my soul has tried to raise itself to God. It is in the hope of again meeting my mother that I believe in life eternal. Oh! how I thought of my mother, the

day when to deserve the recompence of finding her in heaven, I promised myself that the time still left me to live, should be full of purer dreams and better actions.

Jesus, Who has made His Mother triumph near Him in His Divine kingdom, will bless the prayer of a son and a Christian.

Mystical country, abode of the just ! Glorious temple of light and love ! People maintain that our feeble intelligence cannot conceive the extent and the perfection that it reserves for the elect ! But it seems to me—to me, a humble soul, to me, a poor sinner — that I had a presentiment of Paradise already, when I, a little innocent child, went to sleep, both arms round thy neck, oh, my sainted mother, my beloved nurse !

Nov. 11, 1897.

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IX

For her who Prayed



## For her who Prayed

IN most of the churches of Paris, except on solemn *fête* days, there are few people at the "grand messe." It is held at an early hour, and Parisians rise late; it lasts a long time, and the Parisians are too busy. And then, for women, one must not forget the great obstacle—dress. The good God is reasonable; He does not exact that madame should be ready at nine o'clock in the morning. For these reasons the attendance is in general very small on ordinary Sundays in the most frequented parish churches. At about half-past ten, for the later services, the crowd throngs into church. But now, except a rather compact group round the pulpit, there are entire rows of empty chairs, and one could easily count the few faithful.

It is for the three or four old vergers, who doze on the bench at the door; it is for a few dozen

*devotes* and servants; it is for the sisters and the little orphans, whose hats one sees down at the end of the church; it is for the poor, who stand at the bottom of the nave, their caps under their arms, that the divine office is celebrated with all its pomp; that the priest and the two deacons, robed in rich vestments, execute before the altar the priestly movements and gestures, and that the voices of the choristers and children of the choir echo through the sonorous arches the majestic music of the liturgy; that the great organ runs riot—that by turns it scolds, cries, dreams, sighs, and that it pours prayer and rapture in large waves over all the bowed heads.

I attended the High Mass one Sunday not long since. It was in September. At that time of year the Faubourg Saint Germain is nearly deserted. The bourgeois are not yet come back from the country or the seaside, and in the high houses only one or two floors out of five have their shutters open. As for the aristocratic abodes, they are all shut. The owners are at their country seats for shooting; and no one comes to the door of the old houses to ring the bell which the head of a lion holds in its bronze

teeth. All these absences are felt at the High Mass. No one occupies the chairs with the brass plates—Madame la Marquise here, Madame la Duchesse there—nor the padded *prie-dieux*. Nothing but small people—shopkeepers, servants. But that Sunday the church did not display less magnificence in its ceremonies ; for it is, say what they will, the grand school of equality. The fierce democrat, who dreams that all shall bend to the same level, when he receives a poor relation, does not light the drawing-room chandelier, or go down into the cellar and bring up a basket full of the oldest wine ; but the Christian priest welcomes the faithful, however humble they may be, with all the luxury at his disposal, as if they were well-beloved brothers.

I was there, and I prayed. Alas ! I had to make an effort to pray well, to pray not only with the lips but from the bottom of my heart. The little bit of faith which I thought I had lost, and which suffering had brought back to me, is so weak and pitiful. It is like a fire-brand black and almost quenched ; only a few sparks are left, and those must be animated by blowing upon them. In the desert of

my soul, dried up by a life of indifference, I must pull up the weeds of negation and scepticism at every step. Happily you still flow, oh my tears! You water this dry soil, and already I see the green blade of hope springing up!

I prayed then—as well as I could—when I noticed, a short way off, a woman kneeling.

Her elbows on the back of the *prie-dieu*, her chin on her joined and shrivelled hands, she was in the old traditional attitude of adoration, and her profile was as immovable as if it had been painted on the panel of a triptych or surrounded by the lead in a church window. Not quite young—thirty or more—without beauty. But what peacefulness and purity in that thin face! She was one of those seamstresses of Paris who have so much taste in putting a little bit of art into the most simple dress.

Her gloves were fresh, her cloth dress fitted her well, the ribbons of her bonnet were tastefully arranged, but yet with no affectation. The instinctive elegance of my neighbour, obtained at so little cost, spoke of modesty and perfect propriety. One guessed the poor young woman had dressed herself in her

best, only out of respect to the good God, because it was Sunday, and she was going to Mass.

She prayed. And with what fervour! She made no movement; but her head, slightly thrown back, her eyes fixed on the altar, her lips partly open—as if to give vent to the pious thoughts which came from her heart—all in her expressed the transport of the soul towards the infinite horizon.

What did she ask of God? Daily bread, at the most, I am sure. For she did not implore; she simply worshipped. And her silent praise was disinterested, as all is which is inspired by love. Then she was certainly poor—for I saw no jewellery—and probably also very solitary, for she came to church alone. An old maid, without doubt. I imagined her working all day with her needle in some room very high up, with an horizon of roofs and chimneys. Not pretty, having passed the age of romantic dreams, she could not any longer expect to inspire a sentiment, or that a happy marriage would come to change her destiny. Yes, it was just that. An existence like a sundial in a foggy country: hardly any hours of sunshine. The past full of mourning, as for

all of us; the present dull and ordinary: and the certainty of a monotonous future. Renewing her blest branch of box-tree on Palm Sunday must be an event to her.

How she prayed ! And how happy she was in praying ! I could not turn my looks away from the thin and delicate profile, which was immovable, almost petrified by the mystical delight, or from that mouth half opened by the faint and delicate smile of rapture.

How she prayed ! No, she asked for nothing. She had long ago accepted her life of misery and work with entire resignation. No, no, nothing in this world. But with the sublime confidence, and with the admirable hope of simple hearts, she was sure of a better world and eternal happiness, and she enjoyed it already, while her soul expanded in the harmony and perfume, with the inspiring music of the organ and the intoxicating smoke of the censers.

Faith of the humble ! Great treasure of consolation for pitiable humanity ! How mischievous and guilty are those who fight and destroy thee, and how much so was I myself, and I now reproach myself for more

than one page which was prompted by irony and pride !

I have just been reading with bitter sadness the recent writings of a celebrated Anarchist. After a harsh satire—always easy, and made a hundred times—on society, this revolutionary theorist prophesies for some distant future, and at the cost of some bloody convulsions, the dream of a social state, where all shall equally receive nourishment of body and soul and the bread of science, and shall be happy as well as they can be, in the presence of pain and death. It is an ideal—relative—to the triumph of which we must all doubtless contribute.

But millions of men have lived without suspecting this dawn, and other millions will without doubt wait long for it with great impatience.

For progress is only accomplished slowly, and one does not see yet distinctly in what the modern proletarian is much less unhappy than the slave of antiquity.

In the meantime the number of suicides increases without ceasing ; cries of despair sound on all sides, and never among thinking men was the horror of living so manifest as to-day.

Also many, again, take refuge at the feet of Christ, Who makes us indulgent to all suffering, and shows us, beyond the tomb, hope, truth, happiness, and justice.

As for me, I try to remember the faith as it was taught me in my infancy in all its integrity, and to imitate thee, poor daughter of the people, who prayed with so much sincerity in the half-deserted church, guileless Christian, my sister, who hast made me envy thee, and who hast set me an example.

*Nov. 25, 1897.*

x

Imperial Christmas (1811)



## Imperial Christmas

IT is Christmas Eve, the year 1811, and since ten o'clock at night Napoleon works alone in his study in the Palace of the Tuilleries. The vast apartment is nearly dark. Here and there some gilded pieces of furniture shine in the shadow, the frame of an invisible picture, the two heads of lions ornamenting the arms of a chair, the heavy tassels of the curtains. The wax-lights under the metal shades of the two candelabra only light the long table encumbered with atlases and thick registers bound in green morocco, and stamped with N. and the crown. The master has worked for two hours at the geographical maps and on the situation of his armies, and he bends his formidable forehead crossed by a black lock of hair, his forehead heavy with thought—heavy as the world, the conquest of which he is meditating. The open atlas shows a map of Asia, and the hand of

the Emperor, nervous, feminine, charming, slowly with the forefinger traces down, down, there across Persia, a way to India.

Yes, India by the land route? Why not? Because his navy is beaten and destroyed, the conqueror has only this way to go, under the palms of the fabulous forests, followed by his eagles, whose gold sparkles amid the steel of the bayonets, to strike England even in her heart, that is to say, in her Colonial Empire, and in her treasure.

He has already the grandeur of Cæsar and Charlemagne, he wishes also for that of Alexander. He dreams this without surprise. He already knows the East; he left behind him there an immortal legend. The Nile saw him once, a thin general with long hair mounted on a dromedary. On the banks of the Ganges the elephant of Porus would be wanted for the weighty Emperor in the grey great-coat. He knows how to win people, and how they are made fanatical. He will command down there soldiers with bronze faces in white muslin turbans; he will see rajahs blazing with precious stones among his staff; and he will question the monstrous idols raising their

ten arms under their mitres of diamonds about his destiny, because but lately in Egypt the granite flat-nosed Sphinx before which he dreamt, leaning on his sword, did not reveal to him his secret.

Emperor of Europe ! Sultan of Asia ! These shall be the two titles graven on his tomb !

An obstacle. Immense Russia !

But because he has not been able to gain the wavering friendship of Alexander, he will conquer him. And the Emperor's little hand eagerly turns over the leaves of the thick green volume in which the lists tell him, almost to a man, the effectives of the enormous army which is already massing towards the Niemen. Yes, he will vanquish the autocrat of the North, and will drag him as a vassal Czar, followed by his hordes of wild horsemen, to the conquest of the East. •

Emperor of Europe ! Sultan of Asia ! The work is not too great for his desire or his genius. And when he has founded his enormous Empire, there will be no risk of its being divided between his lieutenants like that of Macedonia. For, on the 20th March, Napoleon had a son, to inherit his

glory and his grandeur, and the lips of the Emperor smile at the thought of the child who sleeps so near him, in the silent palace.

But suddenly he raises his head with a movement of surprise. In the well-closed cabinet, and where the thick curtains are drawn, how comes this strange and deep murmur to be heard? It seems as if the large gold bees embroidered on the silk of the hangings had all begun to buzz. The Emperor listens more attentively, and then in the noise he distinguishes the vibration of bells. Ah! . . . Yes. . . . Christmas. . . . "The midnight Mass." It is, in fact, the bells of all the churches in Paris which celebrate the Birth of Christ. Those bells which Bonaparte had but lately re-established in the towers and belfries, when, as a peaceful consul, he reconciled so many brothers at enmity in France.

How many times had they not rung out glorious *Te Deum's* in his honour!

And had they not once more rung out with all their strength, only a few months since, the day of the birth of the King of Rome, memorable day

when Heaven by granting a son to the Hero, seemed to be at one with him, to recognize the legitimacy of his work and to promise its duration.

Still they rung this night, as joyously, as triumphantly as they did\* for Austerlitz or for Wagram, in the cold, clear night, for the humble Child, for the son of the carpenter, born on the straw of a stable, so long ago, while the mysterious voices proclaimed in the starry firmament, "Glory to God and peace on earth."

The Emperor listens to the Christmas bells. He dreams, he thinks of his obscure and wild youth, the midnight Mass of his uncle, the archdeacon, in the Cathedral of Ajaecio, the return of the large family to the old home, the home of so much proudly borne poverty, and of the matronly beauty of his mother, presiding over the frugal supper where they eat chestnuts. His son, the son of the victorious Emperor and the Austrian Archduchess, will not know those miseries, he will be master of the world.

Out-of-doors, in the frosty night, the bells rang still for Christmas.

At the gate of the Tuileries, the guard in leather cap, who walks with long and quick steps in front of his sentry-box, to warm his feet, remembers perhaps at this moment a prayer or a hymn which he had learnt by heart in the village, at his mother's knee, and smiles with tenderness under his moustache at the thought of the Infant Jesus in His cradle. The Emperor heard not the pious call of the bells, he thought only of his son, and suddenly he had a violent desire to see him.

He got up and clapped his hands. Instantly a door hidden in the tapestry was opened. Roustan appeared. At a sign from his master he took up one of the candelabra, and the Emperor, lighted by the faithful mamaluke, went straight across the deserted corridors to the apartment of the little king, entered, dismissed the nurse and the waiting-woman with a gesture, and stood by the cradle of the new-born babe.

The King of Rome was fast asleep. In the whiteness of the linen and lace crossed by the grand cordon of the legion of honour, the tiny face, with closed eyes half sunk in the pillow, and one

of the mottled adorable hands which rests on the coverlet, show like two spots of infantinc flesh ; and over that purity, that innocence which is in a child in its cot, the broad ribbon of scarlt moiré passes like a stream of blood which is to be shed in the hope that the head still so frail shall one day carry the heaviest of crowns, and that the little hand, now delicate and prctty as a flower, will grasp later on a bundle of sceptres.

Napoleon looks at his son, he dreams — and never did human pride so déliciously caress a heart—that the grcat dignitaries of his court—that his generals, more illustrious than the heroes of Homer, his ministers and his senators bdecked with gold, bow before the cradle, trembling with respect, and that the renegade Jacobins, the old regicides who now wear the Imperial livery, hardly dare ask the favour of kissing that childish hand.

The Emperor dreams, and in the confused noise of the bells which ring for the midnight Mass, he thinks he hears the measured tramp of troops and the rumbling of cannon, down there on the frozen roads of Germany and Poland.

Intoxicated with paternal pride, he thinks more than ever of the grand army and of the conquest of Russia and India, and he swears to himself to leave to his heir all the thrones of the Old World. He has already given him the city of St. Peter for a rattle, and the new-born son will soon have other holy cities among his playthings.

Emir of Mecca ! Rajah of Benares ! These are the titles worthy of the King of Rome !

Ah ! why are not the women of France more productive ? Why has not he, the invincible captain, a million, two million soldiers under his orders ? It is the entire universe, the globe of the world, that he would put into that little hand !

He dreams, deaf to the voice of the holy bells, without a thought of Him Who reigns in heaven, and Who looks upon the greatest empires as only ant-hills. He dreams, without seeing in the future his immense army buried in the snows of the Berisina, without seeing the last trophy of his eagles cut down by the grapeshot of the English, and the shattered battalions of Waterloo, without seeing the rock in the middle of the ocean where the tortures of Prometheus

are awaiting him, without seeing, above all, the pale sad young man in the park of Schoenbrünn, under an autumn sky, with the badge of an Austrian order on his white uniform, who coughs as he walks amongst the dead leaves. •

And while the Emperor pursues his mighty chimera, imagines the reign of his son, and the successors of his son, over the whole earth, and supposes himself at last—himself, Napoleon, become, at the end of time, a legendary fabulous myth, a new Mars, a god, solitary and triumphant in the midst of the zodiac of his twelve marshals.

The bells still ring joyously, triumphantly, distractedly, in honour of the poor little Child, born at Bethlehem, Who really conquered the world nineteen hundred years ago, not with blood and victories, but with the word of peace and love, and Who will reign over souls in all the centuries of centuries.

*Dec. 23, 1897.*



XI

The Best Year



## The Best Year

**S**TILL a few turns of the needle on the dial of the clock, and this year will be finished—this year that I have spent almost entirely in suffering, in which I have seen death very near, and at the end of which I find myself physically in a weakened state which announces to me the definite arrival of old age. Behind the frozen window-panes where the white arabesques, traced by a freezing night, are hardly melted, the dark December sky invites me to serious recollections.

What a year! I see myself at Pau, last January, then at Mandres in the month of June. Twice was I extended on the operation-table, surrounded by practitioners in white aprons, whose faces quickly became so serious. I inhale the disgusting smell of chloroform, and hear in my brain, before losing consciousness, a noise of distant hammers. Twice I

was brought back to my Paris lodgings an inert mass, shaken by the movements of the railway-carriage, tossed on the straps of the ambulance-waggon. How long did I remain on my back painfully immovable? A third part of this unhappy year. Oh, the persistent smell of antiseptics! Oh, the interminable nights of sleeplessness, of nightmare!

One sad hour rises before all to my memory. By the open window of my room of suffering the heavy, clammy, overwhelming heat penetrates—a morning in the dog days. I had had fever all night, and could bear no more. I was at the degree of prostration and fatigue when one renounces everything, when one consents to die.

But my old sister is there, she looks at me making a brave effort to smile. I see her fingers tremble a little on the iron bar at the foot of my bed; and, sitting by my pillow, another woman, a very dear friend, is bending over the hand which I have given her, and is passionately pressing it with her lips, which are hot and swollen with crying.

Oh, that instant! I cannot think of it without trembling; it was the time I felt more miserable than

at any other during my long illness. To physical pain one must resign one's self; one asks, one calls for death in one's suffering. But the thought that in suffering one gives pain to those one loves best, or by whom one is loved, and that in dying, one will reduce them to despair, is an intolerable one. I well knew the two hearts which were beating that day by my bed of suffering; I was sure of them, and thinking of myself at that time as dying, I asked myself with agony what would become of them, those loving hearts which beat only for me? and in spite of my weakness I tried to find some kind word to habituate those two poor women to the idea of my departure, saying that after all, if I died, it was not my fault, and almost asked their pardon.

Yes, this year 1897 has been cruel to me. Is it not, I ask myself, the worst of all my life? Not so, oh, my God. It is the best!

For one of Thy priests came. He simply showed me Thy cross. He recalled to me sublime teaching, that pain is unavoidable, that one must relieve that of others with all one's power, that one must accept it one's self without complaint; and, since that time,





fortified by Thy grace and Thine example, I have borne my pain, not only with courage, but with a sort of satisfaction, remembering that I have been what is called a happy person; that I have been more happy than many others, and suffered less than other people, and find it right that the balance should be adjusted, and, when all immediate danger was over, I thanked Thee for having granted me this delay; resigned beforehand to all the evils which may come upon me; happy not to offer in my own person a testimony to the injustice of nature and of the unequal partition of the things of this world, and cherishing the hope of having my share of misfortune before my death.

These are sentiments which will, without doubt, make many of my contemporaries shrug their shoulders; for I only hear voices clamouring for happiness, and on all sides the cry comes, "Life! We demand for all the right of living the whole of life. We claim the whole of life, with all its pleasures and all its joys, the complete expansion of the individual."

Far be it from me to discourage the efforts of

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those who seek to render the conditions of existence tolerable for all, and who dream of diminishing, if not destroying, misery and ignorance.

But can one pronounce in good faith the words, which seem an irony\* to any one not still a child, “The joy of living”?

Where shall we look for it, in fact? In the senses? But every voluptuousness not immediately punished by the sadness of satiated desires is a step towards destruction. In the intellect? But knowledge is also deceiving, and can be compared to an impassable chain of mountains, where the traveller, from the top of every peak he has climbed, sees deep abysses yawning at his feet, and inaccessible heights rising in front of him.

In life—hard for many, for most only mediocre, and for a few privileged people strewn only with a few bright days—there is really but one happiness, one joy—loving. But such is the infirmity of human nature that we love, that is to say we only give our love to others, with the hope of a reciprocal gift. Nothing is more rare than a truly reciprocal feeling, and one who loves devotedly, even to the point of

sacrifice, often only meets with indifference, and sometimes with ingratitude and treachery; so that the feeling which inspires our best hopes is also nearly always the source of our worst deceptions and our most bitter griefs.

What must be done then?

Here, also, as in suffering, Christianity has found the solution. Certainly it orders us to love. What do I say? It is the greatest school of fraternity that the world has ever known, because it tells us to love our neighbour as ourselves. You understand, *as ourselves*. But it wishes us to love without exacting any return, with entire disinterestedness—in fact, as the people say in their artless and deep language, that we love for the love of God. To know how to suffer, how to love, that is the precious secret that I discovered in the Gospel during my illness, and that is why, in this December evening, saying adieu to the year which is closing, which leaves me very feeble, and obliged to be carefully waited upon, I proclaim loudly that it has been more propitious and more bountiful to me than all other years of my life. Oh, if unhappy people knew better how to suffer, how

to love, what a dawn of peace and goodwill would risc upon the earth !

Those who do not believe in miracles ought at least to wish for that. But is it permitted to hope for it ? May one boast of some favourable omens ? In the rcligious influence which, for instance, runs through the recent works of a few writers, and that I see in some scattered leaves of the newspapers ? Or even in the evident uneasiness of the enemies of God, who seem now themselves frightened by the consequences of their baneful work ?

Ah ! that He may come, the Sower of the Parable, and that He may sow in handfuls the seed of resignation and solid Christianity on modern society, which is so dismal and decayed ; where we see in high places so much corruption and deadness of heart, and in low life so much revolt and despair !

What a noble task and what glory it would be for a young poet with genius to show himself a new Chateaubriand, as the forerunner of a revival of the Faith ! Alas ! I can only express this hope, I, a poor man in the decline of life, who holds on to the Cross as a shipwrecked mariner catches at a plank !

I think with sadness of my soul in tatters, being ashamed to offer to God such a miserable gift. But I take confidence in the thought that His pity is like the charity of His servants, the Little Sisters of the Poor, who, out of a few rags and the refuse of kitchens, clothe and feed indigent old people.

Let this year then be blessed, this year that is passing away, for it has been to me a year of trial, a year of grace, during which I have been able to gather up the ruins of my heart, and in which I have relighted in this vessel made of dust a grain of the incense of prayer.

*Dec. 30, 1897.*

xii

A Dialogue of the Dead



## A Dialogue of the Dead

WHEN they had nailed down the coffins and sealed up the tombs, when the functionaries, the learned men, the reporters, and the photographers had retired, when at last the crypt of the Pantheon was empty, the shades of Voltaire and of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which had assisted invisibly at the violation of their own sepulchres, came suddenly to view, for the practice of shades is only to resume their human form when they are out of our presence, as they have no taste for the company of common people of flesh and blood like ourselves. That is what explains, by the way, why spirits have never been able—as far as I know—to call up an authentic shade, a real good spectre like those I lately saw at the Theatre du Châtellet, in a melodrama imitated from the English. They were, I assure you, very horrifying phantoms which a person in the play ran through with

his sword without their giving a sign of the least feeling. Since then my contempt was increased for our sorcerers in frock-coats, who do not even arrive, with all their magic, at what is obtained by a simple machinist by means of a few ingeniously placed mirrors.

Well, then, when the vaults of the Pantheon had fallen into silence and solitude, Voltaire and Rousseau, "living and impalpable spectres," as the advertisement once said of the *Secret de Miss Aurore*, sprang up in front of their 'own tombs, with the appearance they bore during the last years of their lives. The Patriarch of Ferney was easily recognized by his cane, his wig, his nut-cracker profile, and by the pair of shin-bones in silk stockings which served for legs. As for the illustrious Genevese, he was dressed in Armenian costume—caftan *à la Turca*, and cap of mama-mouche, which brought him in the streets of old Paris a success to be compared to that of our Mussulman deputy.

At the first glance our two philosophers knew each other, and, wonderful to relate, their looks did not at once change to hatred and fury. Among many

excellent effects, Death has this good about it, that it reconciles the worst enemies, even men of letters, who on the other side of the river make a truce, and drop the tiresome quarrels which in their lifetime cover them with ridicule, and sometimes with dis-honour.

With quite an aristocratic grace, the father of *Candide* advanced towards the author of the *Confessions*, and, drawing from the fob of his embroidered vest a snuff-box encrusted with diamonds and ornamented with the miniature of the King of Prussia, he offered it to Rousseau, who, without showing repugnance, took a large pinch of snuff and sneezed loudly. Suddenly, remembering what they had just seen, the two shades expressed by their looks, each in his own way, the sentiments which preoccupied them. Voltaire gave his "hideous smile"—the celebrated smile sculptured by Houdon, and sung by Alfred de Musset—and Rousseau grimaced with his under lip, and made his most misanthropical pout.

"My dear Jean-Jacques," then said the old Arouet, "it must be confessed that we have been witnessing a most ignoble ceremony."

"Certainly," replied Rousseau . . . "at a spectacle which fills the heart of men of feeling with disgust."

"And our actual admirers are clumsy people," replied Voltaire. "To rightly establish that Louis XVIII. . . . a fine scholar, if you please, a poet of my school—you know the fine quatrain written by him on the Fan of Marie Antoinette ?

“‘Au milieu des chaleurs extrêmes,  
Heureux d’amuser vos loisirs,  
Je ne veux appeler vers vous que les zéphirs ;  
Les amours y viendront d’eux mêmes.’

Charming, is it not? To prove, then, that Louis XVIII. had permitted them to desecrate our tombs and to scatter our ashes, these stupid preachers just now came to destroy a legend which was dear to them, to absolve the Restoration and the Jesuits of a great sin, and to tear out a page of Victor Hugo, our neighbour in this edifice . . . if I am up to date in the modern slang, it is what might be called '*une gaffe*.'"

"So much the more," continued the philosopher of Geneva, "that, on the matter of respecting tombs, our disciples have some bad examples in the past."

"Yes," interrupted Voltaire, holding his chin with

an air of reflection, "the pillage of the basilica of Saint Denis, the rape of the tombs, the bones of the kings of France thrown into the gutter! . . . Of Louis XIV. especially, on whom I wrote a panegyric, and of Henry IV., in whose' praise I composed a poem, which is not, between ourselves, the best I have written. Yes, it is clear that on that day the populace was despicable, and showed the depth of its ferocity, the instinct of the jackal. . . . But whose fault was it? Is it not you who first said to the people that they are the Sovereign, and, consequently, have authorized beforchand all the explanations and all the excuses in favour of the excesscs of the rabble?"

"No reproaches, Voltaire. You are responsible for these horrors as much as I. If I pursud an impossible dream, if I built on the waves, 'you—you were the indefatigable destroyer of the ideal and of reverence. Opition does not dcceive itself when it associates our two names, and places us before all others as the authors of the Revolution, during which they may say the world looked on at the explosion of human wickedness, and the results of which, once so fanatically admired, seem now to be very doubtful benefits.

" Still I thought only of justice and of the happiness of all. . . . Could I foresee such crimes? Could I foresee that I, a man constantly moved even to tears, the peaceful saunterer, the friend of nature, the drinker of milk, that I should beget all these hearts of stone and all these drinkers of blood, and that, remembering that I proclaimed the right of capital punishment, in the cause of the social compact, Robespierre, my terrible pupil, could cover France with scaffolds? . . . Ah! I often think that when I wrote that fatal page I signed millions of sentences of death."

" Jean-Jacques, my comrade," in his turn said the thin old man, who smiled no longer, " I earn, if that can console you, that I also often doubt the excellence of my work. It certainly draws the picture of my century, so light and so corrupt, which for the first time and in jest pronounced some formidable words. Truly I am afraid of having been as bold as the pupil of the sorcerer, who knew very well the word to make the devil appear out of the alembic, but had forgotten the cabalistic form to make him re-enter it; and the day I saw the priests massacred and a woman of the

streets publicly worshipped as the Goddess of Reason in the Cathedral of Paris, I asked myself seriously if the good society of my time was right in applauding my fit of cynicism and impiety, and if I should not have done better to 'keep to myself all the black-guardisms of the *dictionnaire philosophique*.'

"If again," resumed Jean-Jacques, "one could say that the Revolution passed like a tempest, that the sky afterwards cleared up, and that order and peace succeeded so many convulsions! But it is not so. Since then all the civilized nations have been in a state of permanent trouble. Frightful wars have broken out, armies have fought one against another, as they have not done since the invasion of the Barbarians, and at the time in which we speak all Europe is hard at work founding cannon, and constructing armour-plated vessels, and making trials of them. . . . Alas! I who dreamed of the fast approach of the Golden Age for humanity, of a pastoral Paradise, where innocent youth would sing roundlays of the airs from the *Devin du Village*, and where old men, full of wisdom, would give themselves to the peaceful joys of botany!"

"What would you?" sighed Voltaire. "It would seem that spirits are immortal only to lose in the long run their last illusions. . . . Let us, then, pursue the examination of our consciences. What do you think, if you please, of the famous conquests of the Revolution? of Equality among citizens, for instance?"

"That it exists in law, but not in manners; that aristocracy of birth, which gave rise without doubt to great abuses, has been replaced by that of wealth, which constitutes a much more scandalous inequality; and it is enough to look at the modern world, to make one not expect to see very soon the only aristocracy which ought to be acknowledged by all, that of merit and virtue."

"And your opinion on the submission of the Church to the civil law?"

"I declare that from it has resulted the establishment of a sort of official Atheism, which would seem deplorable even to my Vicaire Savoyard. . . . We are alone, are we not? There is no municipal counsellor here, who, if he heard us, would 'disinfect' our tombs, and would thus cause our remains to be

conveyed once for all into some unknown ground? . . . Well, I will tell you, quite in a whisper, that, since they destroyed by every possible means the religious faith of the French people, they are much less moral and much more unhappy."

"It remains to examine the advantages of the liberty of the press," said Voltaire; "and this touches me, for I am in a certain sense the father of journalism. Now, the press is like my work, which now I judge severely. I have said everything, and, above all, I have contradicted myself. Here and there a page is to be found where truth and justice vibrate, but there is also a remarkable collection of evil, of lies, and obscenity."

"Voltaire, my friend, you have preached tolerance all your life. . . . Well, learn that last summer the cross was given to a major who had ordered the police to disperse a procession of young communicants. What do you say to that?"

"Rousseau, my comrade, you always made great professions of morality, and you wished to persuade smart duchesses to nurse their children. . . . Well, learn that at the present moment we have pretty

‘feminists,’ who print quite plainly that maternal nourishment ought to be considered a remnant of barbarism. How seems that to you?’

Here the two philosophers looked at each other, as good people say, straight in the face, then cried out, one after the other—

“Rousseau, the Revolution which we prepared, did it not by chance make shipwreck?”

“Voltaire, the Declaration of the Rights of Man which was borrowed from our writings, was it not only a mystification?”

“What is still more serious,” replied the defender of Calas, “is not that we weigh such questions in this subterranean solitude, enlightened spirits that we are, but it is that many intelligent people, smitten with a desire for absolute justice, ask themselves these questions, and, in despair, and disgusted with all the evasive solutions which politicians offer them, decide decisively for anarchy.”

“To whom do you say it?” continued the former lover of Madame de Warens. “I am also much afflicted by it; for it is in my writings that the people you speak of have found these arguments. Did I

not launch out one day this beautiful paradox, that all society is founded on the usurpation of some, and the cowardice of others, that all society is bad? So that now, having renounced all my dreams, I have the grief of seeing the most impatient anarachists light the fuse of their bomb with a leaf torn from the *Contrat Social!*!"

Voltaire and Rousseau would have, without doubt, continued their conversation for a long time if a noise had not been heard of steps in the distance of the crypt. It was one of the violators of the tombs, who had forgotten his umbrella, and who came back to fetch it, accompanied by the keeper. And as pure spirits, as we have said above, do not like to show themselves to common mortals, the two shades vanished in a second, and disappeared as if by enchantment.

*Jan. 6, 1898.*



XIII

Saint Vincent de Paul



## Saint Vincent de Paul

**I**F to change the conversation—for in truth we are at this moment surfeited with violent and hateful things, even to nausea—so then, as one purifies the atmosphere of a room by burning sugar, we will talk a little of a brave man, if you will.

The “St. Vincent de Paul” which M. Emmanuel de Broglie has just published, will exactly furnish the subject.

There are already, you need not doubt, many important works on this admirable servant of God and of the poor, and one might fill several shelves of a bookcase with them. Still, M. Emmanuel Broglie thought it would not be useless to write a short but moving and substantial account of this fine subject, and he has quite succeeded. His little volume, which is to be found at Victor Lecoffre’s, the publisher, presents this original feature—that, under a

very pure and distinguished form, it is addressed to all, to the whole public. It is to the people especially that this history of their great friend is addressed.

We state it with joy. In spite of all that has been tried to prompt the crowd to despise religion and to hate its ministers, Saint Vincent de Paul has always remained popular. The men in shirt-sleeves always remain faithful to that good man in a cassock, and the insolent blackguard who has just imitated the cry of a crow on passing an ecclesiastic, will soften an instant after on seeing in the window of a *bric-a-brac* shop the engraving in which Vincent de Paul is represented in a street in Paris in a snow-storm, as having already wrapped a forsaken child in one flap of his cloak, and as now picking up another in the angle of a wall.

It is too easy, alas! to mislead the mind of the people; but, happily, it is less easy to corrupt their heart. Why is it not possible to put this new "Life of Saint Vincent de Paul" under the eyes of all the people? They would learn, I believe, in this little book to compare the unfulfilled promises with which

their ambitious flatterers lull them with the solid and durable benefits which they owe to that great Christian. These benefits are as numerous as they are varied, and one can boldly affirm that, in the matter of charitable institutions, nothing new has been created since the time of Saint Vincent de Paul. I will give some proofs.

We are proud, and with reason, of our night-shelters—quite a recent work, and, I may add, very insufficiently developed; for the unfortunate people who do not know where to sleep have only very few refuges at their disposal in this enormous Paris, and all are situated in very out-of-the-way places.

Yet Vincent de Paul long ago opened, not only in the capital, but in several provincial towns, homes for travellers, where they were given supper and a bed, and the next morning “two sous to help them on their way.”

Do not, either, imagine that our associations of assisted labour date from yesterday. Every time that he opened one of those homes which he called “Charities,” not only did Vincent de Paul recommend the separation, with care, of the healthy poor who

could work, from the infirm who were incapable of doing so, but he wished that workshops should be opened where children, convalescents, and even men in good health could find easy work and earn their own livelihood.

Learn, philanthropists of to-day, that long before you Vincent de Paul started a soup-kitchen. And you, little blue-cloaked one, learn that you have not been the first to distribute soup.

Still, one does not know what to admire most in the works established or dreamed of by Saint Vincent de Paul—the ardent piety which inspired the designs or the practical genius which prompted their guidance. Is an example desired? If there is a scandalous abuse, it is without doubt the exploiting of child-labour; and it is well known that in certain industries and certain trades the apprentices and young people who already can do good work only receive very small salaries for several years.

The State has rightly founded professional schools in order to meet this abuse; but, except in the case of a few favoured ones, the children all have to make a payment. In the workshops of Saint Vincent de

Paul the question was decided by brotherly love. They took in apprentices for nothing, and instructed them for nothing, on the one condition that they undertook to instruct in their turn gratuitously, when they knew the trade, the poor children who replaced them.

These works of hospitality and labour did not survive the founder, and benevolence has waited two hundred years before again taking them up, rather timidly and with a doubtful success. They were, however, but a small part of the enormous enterprises of this old man in the threadbare cassock and old hat, who expired surrounded by the respect and blessing of all.

The "good M. Vincent," who was not bewitching in looks, and had very rustic manners, was in fact during half his long life—he died at the age of eighty-four—something like an all-powerful minister of charity in France.\* He spent millions; he built imposing edifices, such as La Salpêtrière and Les Incurables; he directed phalanxes of priests and nuns; he was present either in person or in thought everywhere where the poor were helped, or where

orphans or new-born crippled children were received, where prisoners were consoled,—everywhere, in fact, where any good was being done.

He had enrolled in his army of goodness not only the Queen, the great people, the whole Court, but also the people of the faubourg and the country. From the one he asked gold, and from the other goodwill. One day, to help the ladies of charity in their visits to the unhappy, he engaged some country girls, some servants with Christian hearts, and from that instituted the holy and admirable family of Grey Sisters, who now, of the number of twenty thousand, are spread throughout the whole world.

His work spread through the whole kingdom. At the first appeal he took his old travelling-cloak, and went into a distant province to preach a mission among the poor, or to visit a prison. If war broke out, spreading mourning and misery, it was he who found and distributed help. And this prodigious work of charity was not sufficient for his zeal. He was at the head of the religious revival which illuminated the seventeenth century. He founded, with M. Ollier, the work of seminaries, and, alone, that of missions,

sending his Lazarists throughout France and even to Barbary, as they said then to the infidels, to take to them the Word of God.

All that with a good temper, modesty, and sweet simplicity.

This director of so many works and of so many souls, this chief, overwhelmed with cares and occupations—this great personage, in short, who was consulted by kings and ministers, never forgot that the most noble duty of a priest is to serve the poor and to touch with his own hands these suffering members of Jesus Christ. He remembered always, also, that one of the most touching virtues of a Christian is humility. On leaving an aristocratic assembly, where he had been begging for his Foundlings, Vincent de Paul would go to one of the horrible prisons of that age to see the galley-slaves, already in chains, not only to exhort them to resignation, but to ease their physical sufferings, carrying kindness as far as to pick off the vermin with which they were covered. And in his house of Saint Lazare, where he took in priests “in retreat,” he was seen, perhaps even on the morning of the day he had to go to the Louvre to sit

in the Council of the Regent, cleaning his guests' boots, the number of his servants not being sufficient to do it.

I know full well we have given up all that, and that such acts, though good for a saint, would provoke more astonishment than admiration even among the best of us, whose piety is lukewarm and transitory, and whose modesty is rarely of good metal. But never mind, it is not possible to repeat too often that in acts of charity there is nothing really solid and good, save Christian charity; and again I thank M. Emmanuel de Broglie for having given me some happy hours in the company of Saint Vincent de Paul, for that man is, without doubt, more interesting than the beautiful lady of a certain age who, when she had founded some beds in a hospital, wished to be decorated, like an old soldier; or than the millionaire banker who has only to write a cheque to endow a great work of charity, and who, when he prudently gives some bounty to the poor, announces it in the papers with the sound of a trumpet.

Jan. 13, 1898.

XIV

The Fête of Joan of Arc



## The Fête of Joan of Arc

WE are, then, going to have—is it quite certain? —a *fête* of Joan of Arc—a periodical and official *fête*, I mean, for the Church of France has many a time honoured the memory of the heroine by ceremonies of pomp and pathos.

As there could not be a question, without risk of intolerable ridicule, of “secularizing” the “good girl of Lorraine” who was burnt at Rouen by the English, the *fêtes* will be religious as well as patriotic. There will be, without doubt, a solemn Mass at Nôtre Dame in the morning; in the afternoon a review of the army of Paris; and at night—the date chosen is May—after having sung hymns to the Virgin, to which might well be added a beautiful prayer for Joan, those faithful to the month of Mary will direct their steps to the fireworks.

We must rejoice at this happy agreement. It is not often we have an opportunity of seeing our

compatriots, animated with a unanimous sentiment; and is there one more deep, more unanimous, than our tender veneration for Joan of Arc?

For it is a cult, to speak properly, that we have vowed to the humble peasant of Domrémy, who, kneeling in the orchard of her paternal home, under the shadow of the church tower, only dreamt of the "great pity" which there was in the Kingdom of France, and listened to the mysterious voices which announced to her that God had chosen her to drive out the invader from the land. She represents and symbolizes to us the unquenchable hope of the final triumph of our country, and the more unfortunate and sad we are in our national life, all the dearer to us is the remembrance of Joan of Arc.

We are passing through very dark and ugly times. Defeated, twenty-seven years ago, after a resistance which was honourable and obstinate, but—we frankly own—not the least glorious, we did not come out of this cruel trial better or wiser, as one might have hoped, for not only have we not made the least effort to reconquer our lost frontier, but we have not known how to establish prosperity, order, and concord, in our

diminished country, which is resigned to act on the defensive.

Posterity will very severely judge—I have a firm conviction of it—this quarter of a century, which re-echoes only with empty words. But the present time is particularly dark; and every Frenchman, worthy of the name, thinks with dread at this moment of the spectacle of the fratricidal discords which threaten us with a social deluge, and of our enemies who rejoice, and of our only ally, who will perhaps be uneasy and lose confidence.

In our distress we, however, take courage a little in turning our thoughts to the past, and remembering that our country has known worse times; and it is a consolation to see—at the end of the sixteenth century of darkness and bloodshed, in a France exhausted by a hundred years of war and invasion—the radiant figure of “the Maid” springing up, who had only to brandish her bright sword to dazzle and dismay her enemies, and to bring back and to establish victory in our ranks. When the lamentable condition of the kingdom at the time Joan of Arc appeared is considered, and when it is proved that, a few years after,

at the end of the reign of Charles VII., the English had only the one town of Calais left to them, one is filled with admiration, and one refuses the pessimist the right of despairing of a country where such a miracle was accomplished.

I have said the word, and I maintain it ; for nothing like it exists in the history of any people. I have just read again in Michelet—who is not in the least to be suspected of mysticism—the tale of that wonderful adventure ; and the more I reflect on it, the more I see the supernatural intervention.

A miracle ! Only lately, in saying this word I should stupidly have shrugged my shoulders. Because I have never seen a miracle with my own eyes, I denied all, in despite of the elementary truth that, if there is a God—and His existence I never doubted—if there is an All-powerful God, Creator of all things visible and invisible, He is superior to the laws of this physical world, His work, and that nothing is impossible to Him.

Now my pride has given way. One day I felt on my forehead the breath of death, and the horror of nothingness, and the need of eternal life awoke in me.

Then I read the Holy Bible again. I read it as it ought to be read, with a simple and confiding heart, and in every page, in every word of the sublime book I saw truth shining.

And I now believe firmly in all those miracles told, described, attested there, by the Evangelists, with an assurance and a precision of details which burns with evident and complete sincerity.

Yes, Jesus has given hearing to the deaf, sight to the blind, feeling to the palsied, life to the dead. He prodigally spread abroad these marvellous benefits during His short passage through this world, to prove that He was the Son of God, the living God, and to found the religion which, for nineteen centuries, has given peace of mind to all men of good will. This faith in Jesus Christ, which I found again—for my childhood was Christian—I wish to keep and to grow in without ceasing, steadily, patiently, without being disengaged by hours of backsliding. For if occasionally I waver and am afraid, like Saint Peter walking on the water, Thou seest nevertheless that I obey Thee, Lord, and Thou art there to sustain me!

The miraculous force which proceeded from the

Person of Christ, when He was among us, He communicated to His disciples. He can always give it to His elect, in a less proportion without doubt, but still supernaturally ; and I believe I recognize the sign of this superior power in the mission and in the acts of Joan of Arc.

Whatever might be the opinion of the free-thinkers of the hospitals and of the clinical *philosophes*, there is no question here of nervous affection. All the words of Joan which have been transmitted to us breathe the most ardent piety, but are also stamped with most excellent good sense and perfect judgment. With her nothing is hallucination. She sees apparitions, she hears voices ; but " Monsieur Saint Michael " and " Madame Sainte Marguerite " speak a clear language to her, and give her clear orders ; to leave her country and her family, to go and find the Dauphin, deliver Orleans, take the king to Rheims, and have him crowned there. And this enterprise, impossible, absurd—if one thinks of who the poor child is—she executes with a perseverance, a courage, which are in truth superhuman.

Certain acts of "the Maid" partake positively of

the miraculous. She goes straight to the king, whom she has never seen, and who conceals himself in a crowd of three hundred gentlemen. She orders a sword to be fetched, which is hidden under an altar in a church and in a country she does not know. She manifests, also, her gift of prophecy. Not only does she predict the success of her mission, but after the coronation, when they want her to continue the warfare, she only consents with repugnance—for her “voices” have not ordered her to do anything after the king was crowned—and she foresees after that the misfortunes which threaten her, and announces her approaching death. Incredulous people, who smile at the word miracle, pay attention to this; the whole life of Joan is one miracle.

Her sanctity, moreover, is, so to say, contagious. The captains who fought by her side, Dunois, Xaintrailles, La Hire, men of blood, pillage, and debauch, became by contact with her, good, pious, and chaste; and it was the same with the rough soldiers. I hope it is not wanting in respect to the Holy Scriptures, in reading of Joan of Arc, to call them to mind every instant. When God gives her her Divine mission,

she obeys immediately, without hesitating, like Mary obeying the Angel Gabriel. She also seems to say, *Ecce ancilla Domini!* At Poitiers, when questioned by the crafty theologians, who feared she was a sorceress, she had an answer for all the most embarrassing and dangerous questions, and, like the Boy of Nazareth in the Sanhedrim, she confounded the doctors. When, with her staff she drove away the ribalds who followed the army, I recognize the gestures of Christ brandishing the scourge over the money-changers and the merchants selling doves in the courts of the Temple.

How, above all, do we not call to mind the scenes of the Passion, in the captivity, the trial, and the anguish of Joan? She also is sold and denied. As in the hand of Judas, the gold of Winchester rang in the hand of the Sire de Ligny, who disposed of her as of his prisoners of war, and who, in abandoning her to the Duke of Burgundy, delivered her in fact to the English; and by a cowardice as guilty as that of St. Peter, in the guard-room of the *Prætorium* he who turned his eyes and pretended not to know her when she

was in peril of death, was the King Charles to whom she had restored his kingdom.

Shall we follow her to all the stations of her calvary? Does the Bishop of Beauvais seem less hideous to you than Caiaphas?

But let us not lay stress upon the crime at Rouen, for it is a shame, alas! to two great nations; for if England committed it with perfidy and ferocity, the King of France was an accomplice by his ingratitude; and the thick and black cloud of smoke which went up on the 30th May, 1431, from the old Market Place soiled at the same time the leopards and the *fleurs de lys*.

A *fête* of Joan of Arc! Certainly we applaud.

That day, under the sky of spring, the people will rejoice, thinking with pride that the same blood which ran in the veins of the pure, the intrepid shepherdess of Domrémy runs in their own.

The army will salute the statue of "the Maid," and the flags will be lowered before the image of the young girl, who died at the age of eighteen, who carried with so much valour, and even raised so high, the banner of liberty.

As for us Christians, we shall go and kneel before the cross that the pious victim kissed with so much ardour on her funeral-pile, and we shall ask Joan the virgin, saint, and martyr, to pray to God for the greatness and glory of France.

*Feb. 3, 1898.*

XV

**Ashes**



## Ashes

IN the cemetery of Elsinore, Hamlet having rejected with a “pah!” of disgust the skull of poor Yorick, pursued the course of his funereal reveries, and in imagination he accompanied the dust of Alexander the Great until he found it stopping up a beer-barrel. “See,” said he to Horatio, “to what we come. Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam: And why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer-barrel?

“ Imperious Cæsar, dead, and turn’d to clay,  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away :  
Oh, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,  
Should patch a wall to expel the winter’s flaw !”

These words that Shakespeare puts into the mouth of the melancholy Prince of Denmark are of those

that it is permitted to remember on this first day of Lent, when the priest traees with ashes a cross on the foreheads of all the faithful, and addresses to every one of them these words : "Remember, O man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return." A ceremony of admirable symbolism, as are all those of the Church. It has not only the object of recalling to us that life is short, death near, and that the little that remains of us, should we be famous conquerors or mighty emperors, will serve some day, perhaps, to stop up a crevice in a wall or the bung-hole of a beer-barrel. And so again this commonplace truth is always useful to repeat and salutary to meditate upon. The ashes strewn upon the head of a Christian have another significance. They recommend him to be humble when he thinks of the merit he may have ; of the place, however considerable it is, that he occupies in the world ; of the good actions, even, that he has been able to do. They order him also to repair the ill he has committed, or, at least, if the fault cannot be remedied, to regret it bitterly, and with all the strength of his heart.

Even without religious sentiment, even for him who only expects final annihilation in the tomb, humility and repentance are two beautiful conditions of the mind. For unless living, like a brute only, for the satisfaction of his passions, man expects from himself a moral progress, and wishes to become wiser and better. He always imagines he has succeeded, and old men always claim to have been taught and perfected by experience. They console themselves thus—little and badly—for their physical decay, and felicitate themselves on the mastery they have achieved over those passions, when often—one must say it—they are only conquered by weariness of the senses. In fact, among the best of us, self-love and vanity decrease with years, and regret augments the bad actions of which we have been guilty. Distrust the hard man who repeats unceasingly, “I can walk with my head up. I have nothing with which to reproach myself.” It is possible he has always obeyed the laws of honesty, and even of honour, fixed by society. But in his secret conscience he lies, or at least he reveals, with a pitiable ignorance of himself, a soul without scruples, a heart without delicacy and without real

goodness. For none of us have the right to hold up our heads with so much assurance and to proclaim ourselves irreproachable. Not one of us can think over his past life without discovering many wrongs done to others, and many failures of duty. All of us have committed great faults, if not perversely, at least selfishly, through admiration and love of our dear self. Yes, all, even the most pure. And it is the purest who suffer most from these importunate remembrances.

So, in the eyes of the believer, who is upheld by a sublime hope, as well as in the eyes of the unbeliever—I mean the man who believes in a moral life—a profound feeling manifests itself in the ceremony of “Ashes,” which reminds man that death threatens him unceasingly, and that he ought to examine himself often, and judge himself humbly, severely, with a spirit of penitence and amendment.

Humility is a virtue, a very great virtue. It alone is able to span the difference which nature and the laws make between men, for it inspires superiors with charity and gentleness, and inferiors with respect and obedience. It alone can lighten and soften the

inevitable injustices of life and society; destroy the instinct of tyranny among the strong, and, among the weak, the instinct of revolt. But how rare they are, those meek-hearted! And how sad it is to see, as now, the hard and miserable triumph of pride and envy, which demands the absurd equality of all, in all possessions.

Alas! absolute equality only exists in death. And when I read the deceitful word "equality" on all our monuments, I begin to regret the dark wisdom of the Middle Ages, which painted on the walls a skeleton playing a violin with a thigh-bone for a bow, and taking into the same abyss the crowned king, the Pope with his tiara, the captain fully armed, the beautiful lady smiling into her mirror, the doctor laden with large books, the peasant with his spade and pickaxe, the workman with his hammer on his shoulder, and the lame man halting on his crutches. Yes, a modern dance of death would not be useless, and would make us reflect a little on some of our idle fancies and vanities. It would not have, I am afraid, the value of the fresco painted at Basle, by Hans Holbein, in the cloister of the Dominicans;

but instead we could multiply the philosophical picture by means of bill-sticking and polychrome impressions.

Can you not imagine, placarded on the walls in Paris, a composition of large design and brilliant colouring, in which is seen Death, elegant and thin, with his bare head, his hollow eyes, his pinched nose, and his ribs of gimp, blowing into a shin-bone in the shape of a flute, and conducting the representatives of contemporary society to the tomb and to oblivion ? Do you not easily recognize in this sinister procession Rothschild and his millions, Eiffel and his tower, a proletarian reading the journal which promises him to-morrow the end of his miseries, a deputy flourishing his cheque, an anarchist with his bomb under his jacket, and even an academician in a coat embroidered with green palms, armed with his harmless sword, and carrying his complete works of several volumes under his arm ?

But I am wrong to joke on this day which calls us to grave thought ; and besides, still better than the scarecrow of the dance of death, have we not this *fête*, so imposing in its funereal simplicity, which the

Church celebrates the Tuesday in Quinquagesima, to remind us how small life and men's works are ?

It was to a church in a crowded quarter of the faubourg, to one of the early services, where one sees only the very poor, that I wished to take a man to-day, an unbeliever—alas ! nearly all are—in whom I felt sure there was a sincere love of the people, to see the giving away of the ashes. Under the dome, which was faintly lighted by the wax candles on the altar, there were very few people—for one could count them—and those of the working-classes, who had not yet been robbed of the consolations of prayer, workmen, domestic servants, on their knees by the side of their baskets, some old people, and four or five artisans with countrified faces, only lately come from their village homes, listening to the service with their baskets of tools—such would be the small assembly.

The friend of the people would recognize in them the gentle, the simple, “the poor in spirit,” the chosen of Jesus ; in fact, those to whom He promised that He will keep for them a place in the kingdom of heaven.

The spectator would be moved. As he sees sprinkled on their foreheads the dust which, according to Hamlet's words, perhaps contains an atom of Alexander or Cæsar, and presents in some sort the image of so many defunct civilizations, of so many lost peoples, he will remember that history is but a long cry of pain, that everywhere and always the lot of the weak and poor is hardly bearable, and that they have never better succour in their sufferings than in lifting their eyes to Heaven.

In this religious atmosphere, among those poor people at prayer, the incredulous would always say to himself, I suppose that it would be a folly and a crime to contend, amongst the humble, against this faith which makes them love one another and believe in a heavenly Father.

He would think of the Gospel, that book unique in the world, which has changed the heart of the universe, and which has for nineteen centuries inspired the most pure virtues and given peace of mind to innumerable Christians. And then—who knows?—thinking of the enormous work of Him Who spoke on the mountain, and Who died on the

cross, saying to himself that the mouth from which came so many eternal truths could not lie, he would believe in Jesus Christ, Son of the most High God, in Whose eyes the planets and stars are less than the grains of that dust which is distributed by the priest of the Eternal Master, Who in the depth of the Infinite mystery, reigns over the dust of worlds and the ashes of suns !

*Feb. 24, 1898.*



XVI

## Christian Renaissance



## Christian Renaissance

THAT a certain number of people who are disgusted with the coarse realism of the modern world, and revolt, in the long run, at the conclusion which is against their true knowledge, and which can only widen the limits of the mysterious without ever penetrating it, have felt the want of the lost ideal, and of the Faith, and have come to themselves, and to the religion of Jesus Christ, and its sublime and strengthening observances, is a fact which cannot be denied. . .

One of my friends, a charming poet, with a brain full of metaphysical dreams, who made a doctrine for himself alone—a sort of Buddhism, as far as I could understand it—owned to me recently his philosophical defeat. “Yes,” he said, “I spent ten years of my life in persuading myself that everything was illusion and nothingness, and my system answered

marvellously. . . . But, the other day, when my little girl was so ill, I began quite simply to pray to a good God, a Heavenly Father, Who could keep her in this world for me, or at the least restore her to me in the next——”

From to-day I consider that man as a recruit and neighbour in the family of Christ. And many more will re-enter it. Official atheism must resign itself to that. People begin to desert its schools of falsehood, where there is nothing for the heart. They perceive at last that they are on the road to fill France with proud and desperate people, and from all parts signs are appearing which allow us to predict a victorious Renaissance of the Christian idea.

It is, for instance, much more than an indication and a symptom, it is—let us proclaim the word—an act of faith that you find in the words spoken at Besançon by M. Ferdinand Brunetière a few days ago. I do not say “discourse,” for it was a rather short speech addressed to a small company, but it is impossible to say more in so few words.

After having declared the downfall of the spiritless philosophy called “natural religion,” after having

proved that a religion cannot be despoiled of its supernatural, of its dogma, and of its discipline, after having recalled the evident truth that what remains are left of virtue come to us by heredity, or education, from Christianity, the steadfast orator also added to all the philosophical and moral reasons which draw us to the faith, a patriotic reason in very rightly observing that, in the whole Catholic world at least, Catholic interests and French interests are strongly united, or, to say more truly, are the same. It is much to be regretted that, distracted by the scandals with which we are in some way periodically afflicted, we have not paid more attention to this discourse which is a true model of concise eloquence. Everything points, however, to the fact that M. Brunetière will soon develope the plan which is traced in this beautiful sketch, and will give us some authoritative studies on the subject.

But if in this Christian revival, M. Brunetière, by the force and the method of his reasoning, perhaps is called to exercise as much influence on grave and studious men as a Ronald, minds smitten especially with the love of art—there are many

nowadays—will be penetrated and surrounded in a pious atmosphere, after having read that most interesting and—I haste to add—deeply sincere book of J. K. Huysmans, “The Cathedral.”

If, as the proverb, which now finds a true application, says, “All roads lead to Rome,” Huysmans has certainly taken the longest. A few years ago an unhealthy attraction made him study the mysterious abominations of Satanism; and in reading one after the other, “*Là-bas*” and “*En Route*,” one might think—if one did not know that the first of these stories is quite imaginary—that Durtal—that is to say Huysmans, ran to take refuge at la Trappe on coming from some black mass. The truth is that this incorrigible, disdainful man, so difficult to satisfy in everything, as well in the matter of style as in cookery, will one day end in being disgusted with himself.

This sentiment which he has so often expressed with energetic frankness, must finally take, in a scrupulous conscience, the form of repentance. Whoever repents finds the need of being forgiven, and there exists but one tribunal where indulgence should

be great and absolutely perfect, that is in confession. Durtal throws himself into penitence—you find in “En Route” pages of that singular and penetrating emotion about that crisis of the soul—and he was henceforth a Christian. But in the course of his devotions, this Christian, who is still an artist and also a savant, positively goes into ecstasies about the Cathedral of Chartres. So his new book is almost entirely devoted to the glories of this marvellous Church, in one place transfigured by most extraordinary caprices of imagination, and in another described with the exactitude of a guide.

“The Cathedral” is now in everybody’s hand, and I am not entrusted in this paper with a literary review of it. I have not to ask myself if the judges were right or not who reproached Huysmans with using certain words and certain comparisons which remind one too much of his old naturalistic works, and who blame him for having emptied into his volume all the strangeness of his mystical library.

We well know what a very particular artist this Huysmans is; at the same time trivial and refined, introducing all at once a crude word in a delicate

thought ; a great rummager in book-lore, where great extravagances are found, and never hesitating to shock if he can astonish. Shall we not accept such a writer as he is, when we find in him an original mind and superior talent ? Still the most severe will forgive the few eccentricities which are a little too strong, and which run through "The Cathedral," when they read in it some really beautiful passages on the art of the Middle Ages, on Gothic architecture, on painted glass, on the Fathers, on sacred music, and also so many interior scenes of exquisite beauty, so many picturesque descriptions of out-of-door sweetness. I recommend especially the low mass in the crypt. It is a little masterpiece. But let us put literature on one side. Where Huysmans moves me is when he is human ; when newly converted, having lived to a ripe age almost entirely by the senses, and having only employed his thoughts with the laborious but amusing gymnastic of literature, he suffers so much trouble in making for himself an inner life ; it is when he deplores in accents of sincerity the little ardour of his piety and the hardness of his heart in prayer.

I then call to mind the terrifying words: "God is sick of lukewarm people."

For I know the like sufferings, just punishment of those who are only frightened in the twilight of life by the emptiness of their souls, and then look into them with agony for some remnants of hope and faith, that they may carefully gather them up. Alas ! from the first hour we have strayed from the Cross ; during the heat of the day we lived far from it, and it is only towards night that its shadow becomes longer and reaches us. That moment is surely propitious, for all is failing us. We return then to that saving Cross, we embrace it with a gesture of distress, and we try to pray. But we have not spent with impunity long years in indifference to eternal things, and it seems to us that the sweet praises of our youth will be dishonoured by passing our impure lips. Courage, however ! You said somewhere, my dear Huysmans, "God cannot be particular if He is content with people like me!"—and like me also ! I add. I have heard that laughed at ; but I think it touching. Still, it is too discouraging, and one must not speak thus. It is wanting in confidence,

and the whole gospel protests : Remember the woman of Samaria, Mary Magdalene, the late workman, the prodigal son, the lost sheep, the preference given to persevering repentance.

Let us pray, then, without ever doubting the inexhaustible pity. Dry though our prayers are, they still have their merit. Are we not already freed from many a baseness and vileness which did beset us? Do we not feel less unjust, more resigned, more humble, and, above all, more charitable? Where was it I read the other day, among the malicious things addressed to you, but in which I participated, that there is only in our state of mind the weariness of *blasés* old men? And why not? It is not so bad to wish to finish properly ; and, for my part, I know nothing more indecent and grotesque than an old *jeune premier*.

The men of the seventeenth century—whom you are wrong to treat lightly, my dear Huysmans, for they were good Christian men—had the wise custom of retiring, in the evening of their days, from the world, to put, as they said, a space between their life and their death, and to consecrate their old age

to dreaming of eternity. There is no more worthy end. Are we not right to imitate them?

Still, believe me, there is another thing. A whisper has passed—*Spiritus fiat ubi vult*—and religious words have been spoken by lips from which no one would have expected them. Poor Verlaine has begun. Do you remember some admirable cries of repentance in “Sagesse”? Later, you wrote your two fine and curious books. I even, whose work and whose past have nothing edifying, I bring in my turn my little contribution to this Christian effort. By another road, but towards the same end, here is M. Brunetière starting; and they will not treat him, I suppose, as a poet and a neurotic.

I ask all sincere people—Is not this fact very remarkable—and can they only see in it a casual chance—that several lay writers, quite independent and disinterested, because they can only expect mockery and abuse for what they do, confess publicly their return to religious belief? And is not that a clear proof that among so many ruins accumulated by the sentimental, philosophical, political, and social bankruptcy of this disastrous *fin de siècle*, the faith remains, like

those imposing cathedrals, which, firm on their foundations, have for so many centuries testified to the immovable force of Christianity and the permanence of the Church.

*March 10, 1898.*

XVII

**Childhood and Prayer**



## Childhood and Prayer

I LATELY received a visit from the son of one of my oldest and best friends, who had not long left the seminary of Saint Sulpice, and who had just been sent to a very poor parish in one of our Parisian faubourgs, as curate.

Burning with zeal, the young priest was felicitating himself on having been placed where there was a large population and much misery. Sure of meeting, more often than in other places, occasions of exercising his ministry of consolation and charity, and firmly resolved to bring back as many souls as he could to God, still even the day after his appointment he could not hide from himself the extreme difficulty of his task. He mentioned, among other sad things, the fact that only a third of the children in the parish had been baptized, and an even smaller number came to

the catechising and to receive some religious instruction.

There can be no delusion about it. In this matter as in many others, alas, soon, in most Christian France, there will be no more Christians.

Those who call themselves Free-thinkers—certainly a mistaken name, for their intolerance is proverbial—may be proud of the result obtained in twenty years. For it is hardly more than twenty years, if I remember rightly, since the Crucifix was definitely removed from the “School stock” (*matériel scolaire*), according to the graceful expression of some thick-headed municipal functionary, and that instead there was substituted—at least, I suppose so—the table of weights and measures, a rather superfluous thing, between you and me, most of the little *faubourgiers* being destined to know only too soon and too well what a pint means. As for the catechism, you are not ignorant that they have also forbidden such a piece of fanaticism and superstition to be used in school, and that they have given out instead of this reactionary book in which only mention is made of virtues to be practised and duties to be fulfilled, little

manuals in which the rights of the young citizens are above all explained to those young people who do not always know how to blow their noses properly, and some of whom wear trousers in tatters, with a bit of shirt hanging out.

I have, from curiosity, turned over some of these tracts ; they recommend themselves mostly for their signal foolishness.

In one of them, under a picture where is seen a smart gentleman in his carriage passing an old man sweeping the road, I read this legend. "By universal suffrage M \* \* \*, in spite of his large fortune, is the equal of the road-mender."

This object-lesson set me thinking, for I know quite well that when they have each voted according to their fancy, the gentleman in the carriage will continue enjoying his large fortune, and the stone-breaker will break stones as before ; and I ask myself if the catechism, the poor old catechism, is not more right when it considers M \* \* \* and the stone-breaker equal in death, but advises the former to be charitable and the latter to be resigned, combats egoism and pride in one, and discontent and envy in

the other, and in this way establishes in the world below a little happiness and justice, in expectation of better things in the next.

These reflections will seem, I am afraid, quite shocking and scandalous to the country delegates, who have hid away the catechism in the scholars' desks as if it was an obscene book, and who are nearly all freemasons, and know "l'acacia," and having seen the "light of the third room" are, it seems, better instructed than humble Christians about the mystery of life and the destiny of the human soul.

But the anger of these inquisitors, on the contrary, will not intimidate me, and I do not see what should hinder me from denouncing the ravages which have already been caused in the popular classes by lay teaching, called neutral, but in reality hostile to all Christian ideas.

These ravages are abominable, and the information given me by my young friend the curate made me shudder. Yes, it is shocking to think that, in one of the most miserable quarters of Paris, in that centre where the benefits of religion are most necessary,

two-thirds of the children are ignorant even of the name of God, and have never prayed.

Among all the sights that human nature can offer, is there one more beautiful, more sweet, more touching than that of a child at prayer? His mother has placed him on his knees in her lap, puts her arms round him, and joins his little hands under hers. She makes him repeat, one by one, the words of a short prayer.

If he is very little, a few words only; for example, this simple cry, "My God, I give Thee my heart!" and if he is a little bigger, the admirable words of "Our Father," or the sweet appeal, "I greet thee, Mary."

If it is morning, the child raises his eyes to the blue sky, and the two pure ones look at each other. Is it evening, near the shaded lamp in the cool and quiet room? then it seems behind the white curtains there is an angel waiting who will go and bear witness in heaven to this sweet act of faith.

Doubtless the child does not yet understand the sacred words which he uses, but he knows that his mother is pleased to hear him repeat them, he looks at her and sees her smile, he feels that she encircles

him with a more caressing embrace, and near the heart which beats and the breast which throbs, in this atmosphere, in this home of love and piety, an instinct of religion awakes in him. As for the happy mother, the happiest moment of her life is that when she presents to God her half-naked child, with his hands joined and prettily kneeling in his little night-gown. What happiness! She prays with him, for him, and by him! The feeling of respectful fear with which the greatness of God sometimes impresses us she does not feel at all now. She is full of ease and confidence. She is sure that God will grant the prayers that are addressed to Him by such a pure mouth; she does not doubt that He Who is infinite strength and absolute wisdom will be touched by so much innocence and weakness. And then there is a Mother on high, the Holy Virgin, who is the source of all mercy; and who will well know how to obtain what another mother asks for by the lisping voice of her child.

Yes, the prayers of Christians are pleasing to God, and take a sublime flight towards His glory! Hymns of the Liturgy chanted by priests, canticles in all

languages sung in unison by the assembly of the faithful, harmonious storms of grand organs which make the naves of the cathedrals tremble, choruses of pilgrims awaking the echoes as they march to some sanctuary in the mountains, pious sobs of the afflicted by the grave-side, sad groanings of repentant souls, burning words of the religious, or the monk in rapture in his cell—yes, they rise to the throne of the Almighty ! But, above all, He is the Father, and in the immense eternal murmur of voices which praise and confess Him, He listens very tenderly, I am sure, to the free and nearly unconscious prayers of little children, like a confused warbling of birds.

The man who in his infancy knew how to pray will never forget it. The passions and strifes of life, the rebellion of heart and senses, can lead him to doubt and to unbelief ; what do I say ? to the worst excesses, and to blasphemy.\* A trace of the faith of his first youth will remain always at the bottom of his heart, like the letters of the old manuscript on the parchment of a palimpsest. If great unhappiness or deep distress comes, either moral or physical, oh how he remembers at once the far-distant hour when, on his

knees in his little cot, he felt the warmth of his mother's face close to his cheek, as she taught him "Our Father" and the Ave. And then he will nearly always fall down, and, covering his face with his hands, will cry out naturally from the bottom of his heart, "My God, have mercy upon me." This cry, for a shipwrecked soul—I know something of it—is the beacon which shines in the darkness, it is the haven, it is salvation !

I feel a true anger against those evil-minded people who, with inconceivable madness, wish to—they have themselves invented the word—"unchristianize" France. Certainly they will not succeed. It is the destiny of the Church to be always militant in this world. Her times of progress and of decay are only movements of ebb and flow, and at this moment we all feel that the tide is rising. But is there truly a worse action than that of robbing the people of their faith and of prayer? For prayers are easy to those humble, simple-hearted ones—it is even one of their privileges—and they there find, better than we others in whom the evil weed of pride always bursts forth, an admirable viaticum for the hard voyage of life.

Alas ! at this very time a great deal of harm has been done, and it is increasing every hour, and generations of unhappy people are being educated who will torment themselves with rebellion and despair.

How can one avoid being alarmed by the thought of such a future ? how not be indignant, above all, at the thought that those who agree to this sad work are not even in good faith, and that the bourgeois politician, ready to vote any way that God may be banished from the schools, would be astonished if his “dame” and “demoiselle” had no religion, as he says in his dull way ? May the fact which I show him to-day—these numbers of children unbaptized, without a shadow of religious thought—make this man look within ; and if one evening in the bosom of his family he is surprised that he is touched by the picture—always grand and charming—of his wife teaching his youngest child some infantine prayers, may he blush for his hypocrisy, and think with horror that the bread of the soul which he grants to his own he takes away from the poor !

*March 24, 1898.*



XVIII

Confidence and Confession



## Confidence and Confession

**I**N writing the first phrase of his "Confessions," "I make an attempt which has never had a precedent, and which will never be imitated," Jean Jacques Rousseau showed himself to be—one may say—a forgetful historian and a bad prophet; for every one knows that in the early Church the penitent accused himself in a loud voice before the assembly of the faithful, and they are also not ignorant that, since the famous book of the philosopher of Geneva, a crowd of writers have not hesitated to declare to the public the most indiscreet confessions of their private life and intimate thoughts.

Let us, however, hasten to add, that of all the revolutions let loose by the genius of Rousseau, in politics or in manners, this one at least has borne good fruit. Literature was renewed by it, and this appeal to sincerity has given us many masterpieces.

No writing is more interesting, more passionate, and, in fact, has more chance of lasting than that where a man strives in good faith to lay bare his soul, and show himself as he is. But he does not succeed easily. Between the head which thinks and the hand which holds the pen, and ought to write the remembrance, there is an almost impassable space, where self-love and shame are watching. Distrust printed confessions ! One might generally apply to them what some one wittily said of certain translations : "they are unfaithful beauties." The portrait of a painter by himself is always flattered.

What courage it required, on the contrary, of the Christian of the heroic ages, who then, kneeling before his fellow-Christians, humbly declared his faults, and asked pardon ! Let us say it softly. It was too great. We are no longer in the Catacombs of Rome, and the Church has done very wisely to institute secret avowal; and to require absolute reserve from him who receives it, and to place the priest in the shadow of the confessional. With any one who has a wish for moral improvement, examination of conscience is a need. In a comedy, the name of which

I do not now remember, some one having used the trite expression—"I only visit those I esteem,"—a wit replied, "If one visited only those one esteemed, one would visit hardly any one, and there would even be days when one could not visit one's self." Under that irony there is an incontestable truth. When we make out—and we all do it at one time or other—the balance-sheet of our lives, we shall discover without difficulty—and I speak of the least wicked of us—many thoughts, not a few words, and a certain number of actions, of which we are far from being proud. Not only in thinking of the little good we have done, we might often say to ourselves, like Titus, *Diem perdidit*, but we also well remember many words and acts which make us sadly bow our heads. Even without any religious feeling, this moral consistency has excellent results. The man who questions himself every day without weakness, and judges himself severely, becomes better rapidly.

Nevertheless, this examination is not sufficient, and after having made it, it is a real necessity, at least with most of us, to show some one the state of our soul. People have been very wrong to laugh at the

confidants of classic tragedy. At certain serious and sad hours of our lives we are obliged to unburden ourselves to an *Arbate* or a *Théramène*. We speak to him in plain prose, in a familiar style, and not in pomposous Alexandrines—that is all the difference. The wisest—and are they not always wise in acting thus?—only open their hearts to a friend whose discretion they have proved; but some people do not hesitate to open their heart to the first comer, so much is the want felt by human nature.

How is it, then, that confidences generally do not relieve us? Ah! it is because man is full of contradictions, and that at the moment, even when an imperious instinct drives him to say everything with entire frankness, he feels himself held back, and drawn in a contrary direction by a feeling of fear and shame. It is that even to a most sensible and safe companion we only show the truth incompletely arranged, and are very careful not to forget any circumstance which is advantageous and can excuse us. One day the weight of a fault is too heavy for us. We ask an affectionate friend to bear the weight with us, he listens to us with indulgence, and speaks words

of consolation. What good if, on leaving him, we feel we have hidden something of our wickedness from him? We are only sadder and more ashamed, and we have one more remorse, that of having deceived our friend. Such confessions are like those of the writers of books, who, as I said above, ought to be censured.

You remember the beautiful page where Rousseau, in accents of the poignant repentance, accuses himself of having in his youth, when a footman at Madame de Vercellis', attributed to a young servant-maid a theft that he had himself committed. But the enemies of the philosopher have pretended, since the publication of his book, that it was not a ribbon of no value, but a silver spoon. I will not believe it, for the passage in the "Confessions" vibrates with sorrow and sincerity, but still, speaking truly, the fault remains the same. But if Jean Jacques, in his recital, has really replaced the spoon by a ribbon, that would only be a proof of the caprice, common to all, not to own our bad deeds, without all sorts of attenuations and palliations.

I repeat it; it is the same with nearly all confidences.

They do not tell the naked truth, they do not call things by their real names. Very rarely a man will say in words to another man: "I have not been honest! I have deceived my friend! I have been ungrateful! I have been unkind! I have been a coward!"

It is here that the strength and grandeur of Christian confession appears.

Unhappy one, trembling under the heavy weight of thy evil memories, approach and lay aside all fear of man. Thou hast not to dread inspiring the horror and disgust of the unknown anonymous person whom thou takest as a confidant. For his lips are bound by the sacramental seal to keep thy secret. He who listens to thee in that little box does not even distinguish thy face, and he will not see thee blush. Speak! Own all thy shame! He will only reply with fatherly indulgence, will only speak of pity and pardon. He will, of course, desire thee to repair the evil thou hast done, but, if it is too late for that, if it is not possible, he will be content with a pouring out of thy heart in true repentance. Then he will impose on thee only the mild punishment that thou

perfume thy soul with beautiful prayers, he will raise his hand towards thy brow, he will pronounce some Latin words, and thou wilt depart, consoled, absolved, and feeling thy heart as light as if it was held up by angels' wings.

But, for all that, thou repliest with a voice of misery, one must not doubt the virtue of the Sacrament, one must believe. Child of the civilized world, is that so very difficult? Dost thou not feel one single drop of the blood burn in thee which has flowed in the veins of thy race for so many centuries? Dost thou not still hear the miraculous word resound which cured the old world of its corruption, and subdued the ferocity of the barbarians? Hast thou not read and meditated on the Gospel, the only book where there is a reply for all the agonies of the soul?

Poor man! Do not listen to those who tell you that faith is dead, and that humanity has freed itself from all its past, for a century,—that is to say, since yesterday. To promulgate the new law—I admit it would be an effort for the better—it would be necessary to cover France with scaffolds, stain Europe

with long and bloody wars, without even then alleviating the cry of those who suffer.

Jesus Christ, on the contrary, only gave His own blood, and was willing to submit to the punishment of criminals, that His Divine religion might triumph ; and His work is intact after nineteen hundred years in every place where you meet men less wicked and less unhappy, everywhere a little justice and goodness throbs--look--and you will see the cross, the remembrance the God-Man left us of His toil and His sacrifice.

I was long like thee, poor sinner, with a troubled soul, oh my brother. Not more than thee, perhaps, was I guilty. Only the hypocrite Pharisee has the audacity to say "I am clean," and Joseph de Maistre is right in saying that the conscience of an honest man has still something abominable. Like thee, I was very miserable, and I sought, by instinct, a confidant full of clemency and tenderness. I found one.

Do as I did. Re-open thy Bible, and return to the Cross. Stripped of all thy pride, present thyself before the tribunal founded by Christ, where a great pity is to be found which exceeds our most sublime

dreams of justice. Even yesterday we wondered at the pity of the magistrates, who excused a poor mother for having purloined a loaf of bread for her child. The minister of God who awaits thee at the confessional only asks of thee a few tears to wash off all the stains of thy soul ; for he holds his power from the Master of Infinite Goodness, Who pardoned the repentant thief on Calvary, and then opened to him the glorious way to heaven and to life eternal.

*March 31, 1898.*

THE END